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## **NEGOTIATIONS OF POWER A GENDER PERSPECTIVE**

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Edited by  
**Felix Wilfred**

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A JOURNAL FOR SOCIO-RELIGIOUS RESEARCH

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## Negotiations of Power - Gender Perspective

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## Editorial

There are many parameters to measure the advancement of any society or country. One clear indicator is the status of women. Whether women enjoy dignity, rights and whether there is gender justice and equality are concerns of all – women and men. The project of women's emancipation and the regaining of their full humanity involves multi-pronged approaches and strategies. Negotiation of power is one of them. The question is treated in this issue from a feminist perspective.

Power is not only an issue of domination and subjugation. While patriarchy reduces power to this dimension alone, women bring to us a positive and creative understanding of power, even while they challenge the patriarchal modes of exercising power at all domains. If power is to circulate through the entire social body – as it should – it is women's negotiations with power that will ensure that it does not get stagnated at some points to upset the equilibrium and cause ill-health to this body.

I wish to thank the five women contributors to this volume who are great scholars and intellectual leaders of national stature. On the basis of their study and research they have illumined the theme of this issue of *Jeevadhara* from different angles. Mythili Sivaraman, with the help of solid statistics tells us about the alarming situation of sex ratio in our country, especially in the more affluent states. She discusses feminization of labour and tells about the need to negotiate power through economic activity. Praveena Kodoth leads us to see the changes that have taken place among the different segments of the society in relation to dowry and marriages and the impact they have on women. She also discusses the various policies that have come into existence to control the practice of dowry. This again is another instance of women's negotiation of power. In her contribution, Ammu Joseph stresses the role of media in relation to women's issues

and the urgent need for women's voices to be heard. Crystal David John investigates the androcentrism in present-day economics and she tells us what economics would imply when power is negotiated from a feminist standpoint. Dealing with the re-vision of power, Kochurani in her article discusses the various systems patriarchy has created to subjugate women, and shows how valiant women have negotiated for power-relationships on equal basis.

The lone male voice in this volume is my own. My article discusses the ways in which women negotiate with religious power. This contribution of mine and editing of this volume is intended to underline, at a personal level, my commitment to the cause of women. I have received in my life so much from women - starting from my mother - that I can never think of paying back adequately my debt of gratitude to them.

This volume would not have seen the day but for the help of several women. In preparing this volume the contribution of my doctoral student Kochurani was very significant. She assisted me ably in organizing a national conference in the university of Madras in August, 2007, on the theme of negotiation of power from a gender perspective, and the articles here are papers originally presented at this conference. I wish to express my appreciation for her many suggestions and advice in the preparation of this number of *Jeevadhara*. I thank Pushpa Joseph, teaching cum research fellow in the university, for her help in preparing this issue. My thanks are due to Majella for her office assistance. My research assistant, Pramila, read through all the articles carefully and helped me with the editorial changes and corrections. Finally I wish to thank Flora, my secretary, for following through every stage of the preparation of this volume and for her generous helps in getting it ready for the press.

Faculty of Arts  
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**Felix Wilfred**



# **Changing Power Equations – A Gender Perspective**

**Mythiliy Sivaraman**

Mythiliy Sivaraman, Vice-President (AIDWA), of All-India Democratic Women's Association in this article talks about sex ratio as one of the powerful indicators of the status of women in society. She discusses feminization of labour and empowerment of women through economic activity. The changing phases of gender power equations and developments that could take place is dealt with in this article. She argues her points with the support of thought provoking statistical data.

Sixty four years after independence, nearly 60% of all pregnant women in India are considered anemic. Nearly 60% of girls drop out of school before completing Grade 5. Nearly 60% of women get married before the age of 18. 60% of women use wood or cow dung for cooking. Women occupy far less than 10% of parliament and assembly seats and of cabinet positions. Women occupy 4% of positions in High Courts and Supreme Court and 3% in government administrator and management positions. A rape occurs every 34 minutes and a woman is molested every 26 minutes somewhere in the country. More than half the men think that wife-beating is acceptable. And more than half the women think so too!

## **The Missing Women of India**

What we are concerned about is not just about how things are, but also about how things are changing, what the trend is in gender power relations. If you ask me to zero in on only one measurable indicator, just one, that would capture the status of women in our society and how it is changing, I would say it can be the male female sex ratio – the number of women per 1000 men in the population.

Some years back when I visited Omalur Taluq of Salem District, I came across a 14 year-old school boy who was shocked when his mother gave birth to twin girls. He already had two other younger sisters. At his school he was taunted by friends, "let us see how you are going to get all your four sisters married off. Your father is already getting old and the whole burden will fall on your shoulders". He was advised by his friends to get rid of the twins. He threatened his parents that he would run away from home unless they kill off the twin infant sisters. When his parents refused to do so, he ran away. It is not surprising that Omalur makes the grade as among our country's 50 worst districts in terms of sex ratio.

It is the sex ratio of the country that has been consistently declining over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, going down from 972 women per 1000 men in 1901 to 933 women per 1000 men in 2001. So, how many women are missing, taking a cue from Professor Amartya Sen's famous line on the missing women of India. One quick calculation shows that we have in this country some five crore less women today than what should have been there if normal and natural situations had prevailed. Five crore women missing or one woman missing for every 11 women present, the missing woman finished off before birth or after birth, or let to die undercared.

What is of great concern, however, is the most recent trend in this as well as in the child sex ratio during the liberalisation period. What are the two states in India that contain the ten worst districts in terms of adverse sex ratio? Are they the less developed Bihar and Madhya Pradesh? No, they are the really rich Punjab and Haryana. In fact, Punjab with per capita income among the highest in the country has a sex ratio of only 874 as compared to Bihar which has a sex ratio of 921. The very prosperous states of Haryana, Punjab, Gujarat and Maharashtra figure in the bottom half of the list in terms of sex ratio.

### **"May Even My Enemy Not Have A Daughter"**

The same is the pattern in child sex ratio – sex ratio among children below the age of six. There is a steep drop in the ten year period of new economic policies, 1991 to 2001. The latest National Family Health Survey-3, carried out in 2005-06, finds that the child sex ratio



has dropped further to 918 girls to 1000 boys from 927 during the 2001 census. The only states where this ratio fell below 900 girls to 1000 boys in 2001 are the prosperous states of Punjab, Haryana, Gujarat and Delhi. Anyone would think that prosperity and technology development is good news to society. But it does not seem to be so for the girl child. Modern technologies like amniocentesis and ultrascan have made it possible to detect the sex of the child before birth – made illegal by the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Technique Prevention Act – and put an end to the female foetus. It is recorded that in some parts of the country several doctors get 90% of their income from such illegal tests and abortions. As the well known demographer Prof. Ashish Bose points out: “This, to our mind, is a symptom of civilisational collapse.”

That the missing of girls become more and more when people become richer and richer is most starkly brought about in stunning numbers that came out of the National Sample Survey done in 1999-2000. It showed that the families with the lowest per capita income in Punjab had a robust child sex ratio of 1200, while the families in the highest income bracket in that state had a ratio of an abysmal 650. Such disparity was even wider in Haryana. Another study showed that educated families have worse child sex ratio compared to uneducated families. We should note here that one dimension to son preference is that it is the son who will go to the gulf or western countries and thus increase the status of the family in the public eye, apart from increased prosperity.

There is also a caste connection to this. This also explains why the southern states in India have a better track record in sex ratio compared to northern states. An article published in 2003 points out a regional correlation between high number of Brahmins and Rajputs and low number of females. It goes on to say: “In south India, however, gender ratios are much better. Some demographers believe this is because the predominant culture of the north – brought by Aryan invaders who introduced the caste hierarchy, patrilineal inheritance, and male kinship patterns – is different from the Dravidian or indigenous culture of the South, where Brahmins are much thinner on the ground.”

### **“Civilisational Collapse”**

As for Tamilnadu, Madurai and Salem districts had the same Child Sex Ratio as the state in 1941 – with more girls than boys – but declined faster than the state with Salem touching 826 compared to the state average of 939 in 2001. This is in line with the finding of my organisation, AIDWA. Some fifty years back there was hardly any dowry practice among the major caste groups involved in infanticide now, but it has caught on very rapidly during this period. The worrisome part of the picture is that dowry and infanticide are spreading to many other caste groups too now, including Dalits. Our study also confirmed to us what Prof. Bose says, citing Mira Shiva: “Many women opted for female foeticide not because they were heartless but because they were genuinely concerned about the fate of girls who are being increasingly subjected to eve-teasing, molestation and sexual harassment and, after marriage exposed to the risk of bride burning and dowry death, in the unending demand for dowry from our emerging consumerist society. This calls for a good look at gender issues in all their ramifications in our increasingly dysfunctional society.”

### **Deadly Combination of Caste and Class Against Women**

We thus have the picture that there are more and more missing girls in the recent period – the period when the nation’s economic growth has got on to the fast track. More are the missing women when the wealth generated is more and when the caste layer is higher. A deadly combination of caste and class is working against women.

But even deadlier is the consumer culture avidly promoted under the new economic regime we are exposed to now. To quote Professor Rajini Palriwala: “Dowry as it is practiced today has never been part of the tradition or reflected in the Shastras... In a concentrated form, dowry encapsulates contemporary and intensified inequalities and oppressions – caste, class and gender; it encapsulates the .... consumerist desires of today, the new religion of liberalization.” Woman becomes the medium to satisfy man’s greed, fuelled by the consumerist ethos, by bringing in the dowry. It is this dowry that leads to hoardings like “invest Rs.1000 now and save Rs.1 lakh later” at scan centres that illegally identify the sex of the foetus for the



anxious parents. The law against such sex determination remains largely on paper, which brings me to my next point of what the government is doing about all this.

Sex ratio is one indicator – a powerful indicator – of the status of women in society and is in tandem with other indicators as in education, health, jobs, violence and the like. What are our governments, our elected representatives doing when all these indicators are staring them in the face? The near double digit growth of the economy has not made any dent on the issues women face. If one looks at the Draft Approach Paper to the Eleventh Five Year Plan that is supposed to run from 2007 to 2012, one cannot but be disappointed. As Vina Mazumdar, the eminent academician and activist, lamented, in the 92 page document, women's developmental needs had been disposed off in just three paragraphs. AIDWA also wrote to the Planning Commission, pointing out that several critical issues highlighted by the Mid Term Appraisal of the Tenth Plan had been neglected in the Approach Paper. Professor Indira Hirway of the Centre for Development Alternatives points out the glossing over of the qualitative shift from regular to irregular forms of work for women.

### **Feminisation of the Informal Sector**

It is to this irregular form of work, the informal sector employment of women, that largely concerns the underprivileged sections in rural and urban areas, that I want to turn to now.

It is a worldwide trend, documented by many, that globalisation has meant a shrinking of the formal or organized sector of manufacture in developing countries and a corresponding increase in the share of the unorganized sector – the sector where the people employed do not have job security, wage protection, medical support or retirement benefits. This is because labour intensive manufacture shifts to these countries in search of lowest cost of labour and the governments of these countries too, enamoured of the export and foreign exchange earning opportunity, keep weakening the labour protection measures of the land. The organized segment of industry too keeps shifting to contract labour, casualisation and outsourcing from the small sector.

So much so, the growth rate of the unorganized sector employment in India in the period of 1983 to 2000 is more than double the growth in the organised sector. Presently, the organized sector accounts for



less than 7% of total employment in the country. (Close to two thirds of the unorganised workers are, of course, engaged in agriculture. If one ignores the farm sector, one sixth of the total employment in the country is in the organized sector.) It is noteworthy that Tamilnadu which is regarded as among the industrialised states in the country, has only 10% of its employment in the organized sector, while the much less industrialised Kerala has more than 25% employment in the organized sector!

The gender differential is quite marked in this sector. Called "the feminization of the informal sector", one finds that women-involvement in this sector is growing faster than men-involvement. Since capital seeks out the lowest possible labour cost it wants to incur, women – and quite often children – fit the bill, as their income is regarded as secondary, and can be much lower than of men. It is, therefore, not surprising that while 92% of working men are in the informal sector, 96% of working women are in this sector. Once again, this women involvement is largely in the rural sector and in the agricultural sector. Census data shows that between 1991 and 2001, the share of female workforce in rural areas increased from 32% to 36%, while that of men declined from 68% to 64%. If you look at agricultural labour alone, the share of women is nearly equal, at 47% in 2001. Another aspect to note is that the largest increase for women is in the marginal worker category where they do not get work much of the time. The number of main women workers increased by 8% between the two census periods, while the number of marginal women workers more than doubled.

### **Women and Agricultural labour in the rice bowl of Thanjavur**

What do these numbers tell us? Why does this happen? If we look at some more numbers for certain districts in Tamil Nadu that could probably lead us to some answers. Women constitute 44% of total agricultural labour in the rice bowl of Tamil Nadu, Thanjavur district, which tops in agricultural prosperity. But this ratio is as high as 58% for agriculturally backward Ramanathapuram district. The dry districts of Namakkal, Pudukkotai, Tiruvannamalai and Perambalur have 55 to 60% women agricultural workers. We are now able to identify that it is the lack of irrigation and inability of agriculture to

support the rural population that forces the men of these districts to migrate to other areas seeking livelihood, leaving their women to crowd the weak agricultural base. This out-migration could be for a better paying industrial job, or a distress-driven phenomenon seeking marginal livelihood elsewhere. Studies show and our own observations show that the latter is the more dominant influence.

The Magsaysay award winning journalist P Sainath has chronicled many tales of such migration resulting from loss making crop production and its effect on them and on their families. Overall, in India, about one third of rural males migrate for part of the year looking for work in other rural areas, slums in towns and in the back breaking construction industry. In fact, their migration to urban areas has also slowed down. The NSS figures show that of total migration from rural areas, two thirds are from rural to rural areas and only a third is from rural to urban migration. It is taking a long time for the government to even acknowledge that their neo-liberal economic policies are at the root of this agrarian crisis and of the mounting suicides that have become so routine that they no longer are news to the media.

### **Heavier Burden as Women**

But coming to the gender aspect of this feminization of agriculture, does this in any way imply – based on the conventional expectation that involvement in economic activity would empower women – that there is some shift in power equations in the rural areas? Apart from one's own observations, one could look at a study that tried to assess how men and women spend their time over a typical week. Called time-use study, it was conducted in 1998-99 in six states, including Tamilnadu by the National Sample Survey Organisation. Of the total 168 hrs available to a person in a week, a rural male was found to be involved in productive work for about 42 hours, while the rural female was involved for 23 hours. It must be remembered this is for the average person, including children as well as those who do not go to work. However, if one includes the domestic work – house maintenance, cooking, child and elder caring – which constitutes the labour reproduction effort needed to sustain productive work, the woman spends a good 34 hours against less than 4 hours that a man spends. Thus, in the total time spent on productive and reproductive

work, a rural male spends just 46 hours while the rural female spends 57 hours, a good 23% more. Thus, for the total work time required to sustain national economy, women shoulder 55% of the burden and men, 45%, for the country as a whole.

### **Unpaid Work of Women**

Another thing that comes out of this time-use study is the much higher unpaid work that women do as compared to men. What is this unpaid work? This is not to be confused with the cooking and child caring kind of work of a woman, to which I will come to, a little later. This is really productive work like that of a woman who tends the family cow that provides income to the family or work done in exchange for some benefit. For urban and rural areas put together, the average woman was not paid 51% of the time, while the man was not paid 33% of the time. This is an indicator of the larger invisibility of woman's work. Here, Tamilnadu fares better as the woman's unpaid time is much lower at 32% (while man's unpaid time is 24%) while in Haryana this female unpaid time is a whopping 86%! This is clearly because in those northern states, patriarchy is much more entrenched and women are not as free to go out to work as in southern states.

Yet another outcome of this time-use study is the way it illustrates how census and National Sample Survey studies tend to underestimate women's participation in productive work. One measure is the work-participation rate, that is, the number of working women as a percentage of the total population of women. For instance, the 1991 census showed a women's work participation of 30% for Tamilnadu and the National Sample Survey of 1993-94 put it at 34%, while the later time-use study showed that 50% or half the women population were working. This underestimation was totally in the agricultural sector.

What all this indicates is that in the rural sector, gendered power differential is still very strong despite the role women in the productive work being very high and increasing, even when one does not count the household work. In fact, a researcher, Cecile Jackson, points out that as household incomes rise, inequality within the family – as measured by food intake – increases instead of decreasing, until relatively high incomes are reached. Centuries old power equations



cannot change so easily. Changes, if any, would be small and slow. In fact, if this time-use study done almost ten years back is repeated, it could give a fairly good indication of what changes are taking place in terms of household maintenance work sharing by men and how the percentage of woman's unpaid work is moving - two reasonably good indicators.

Another strong indicator of gender empowerment is the trend in the disparity of wages between men and women. The 55<sup>th</sup> round of National Sample Survey held in 1999-2000 shows that the average wage of a woman worker in the agricultural sector is only 65% of that of the man's wage, for the country as a whole. In Tamilnadu this ratio is an abysmal 51% - that is, women get paid only half as much as men - the lowest percentage among the major states. Of what use is the increasing feminization of agricultural work if the wage disparity is so high? This is another indication that the rural male migration in Tamilnadu is largely distress-driven.

### **Informal Sector in Industry**

Let us now take a look at the other part of the informal sector - the urban sector. Some time back, the Commerce Minister of India, Jairam Ramesh announced that in the year 2004-05, India's export sector accounted for some 160 lakh jobs and it would double in the next five years. That is some growth! However, he tempered it by stating that two thirds of these jobs were in the informal sector and some 80% of those employed were women. Let me temper it further by stating that this still accounts for less than one tenth of total non-agricultural employment and, as Debashish Bhattacharjee points out, even if all of export manufacturing is done by women, it still "is doubtful that this would result in a feminization of the Indian manufacturing workforce as a whole", because overall employment in manufacturing is shrinking, gender-based wage differentials widened among regular wage/salaried workers and women were increasingly taking to self-employment and services.

There is a point of view that at least the non-farm informal sector employment implies some empowerment for the women involved. So how is life for these women in general? I would dwell briefly on a study made by Anandhi of Madras Institute of Development Studies of a pharmaceutical industry cluster close to Chennai at Alathur. The

workers in these units are almost totally unmarried girls in casual employment, while the supervisors are almost totally men. Many units simply sack the girls when they get married or become pregnant. The secretary of the local companies association explained to Anandhi why this is so: "Only the young unmarried girls can spend so many hours inside the company without family responsibilities. Women at the young age are physically fit for arduous work and they lose physical strength and energy once they get married and have children. We cannot afford to give them maternity leave, sick leave, etc. Moreover, what we care for is efficiency and concentration in work for which we train them. In any case, they are like machines with little brain. So if you mould them at a young age, they will be as efficient as machines, and work for as many hours we want them to work."

Anandhi also catalogues how, for many girls, yielding to the sexual demands of supervisors and chemists is the only way to escape harsh working conditions such as bottle washing. One woman commented: "almost all supervisors in this company are like this." What is, however, to be noted is that such work outside home has a certain liberating influence on the girls. As one of them said: "We do not feel so great working in the company. But unlike our mothers we do not have to toil under the sun. Besides, I like going out to work since I can dress up well. If I am at home I will not have been allowed to dress up like this."

### **Not Different for Women Engineers and Professionals**

Change is happening, no doubt. It is happening faster in the urban educated and middle class sector, where more and more women are becoming engineers and software professionals. It would be interesting to look at the gender equations in this more privileged sector and see how it is evolving. Two studies conducted by two faculty members of IIT Bombay over a period of 10 years show that the proportion of women passing out of engineering colleges increased from less than one percent in the 1970s to around 17% by year 2000, much of the increase coming in the later years. Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Maharashtra are the four states that lead in producing women engineers. One important aspect that came through the study was that more than 80 percent of them had schooling in city or town, 60% studied in English medium and more than 70% had a parent

who was graduate or post-graduate. Corresponding numbers for male engineering students is not known, but it is obvious they will be very much lower, indicating that by and large, it is girls from privileged backgrounds that get the opportunity to become engineers and class divide among women engineers is much more skewed than among men engineers.

The study also found that it is harder for women engineers to find jobs, and unemployment was higher among them than among men. Some companies coming for campus recruitment openly stated that they will not take female engineers and most interviewers were not even aware of the legal implications of questioning women candidates differently. It was also seen that women engineers tended to move more into teaching and research jobs than into industry. The study showed that employers were generally ambivalent towards suitability of women engineers for shop floor work or work involving travel, though most of them considered women to be more disciplined, hard working, punctual and obedient. A majority of women executives interviewed felt that a woman had to work harder to get the same credibility as male engineers but only 22% of male executives agreed with this view.

The root of the problem rests in what the authors of the study describe as the work format "so designed that a person works for 30 or more years, five or six days a week in an office or a factory, the domestic needs being taken care of by another individual, the wife". That format, not suited to the woman professional in current society, has not changed and even if the wife goes out to work, she feels compelled to take care of the domestic work. Real change is quite some way away. Facilitations such as flexitime, working from home, part-time job, long leaves, employment for husband and wife together and child care centres are not actively promoted, nor are societal awareness programmes for men to shoulder domestic responsibilities on equal footing taken up with any vigour.

### **"If You Have a Mentor, You Are Having an Affair"**

If there is any middle income sector where change can happen sooner than others it will be the information technology sector, where shortage of skills is felt and companies are forced to listen to their employees and to woo them. And women form a good part of the



workforce, in increasing numbers. They are said to be 21% of the nearly twenty lakh persons in this sector, up from 10% in 1993. Women here battle the unusually long working hours with their gendered domestic roles, which have not diminished at all. In quite a few cases, parents or parents-in-law pitch in at the household and some husbands too help with childcare, but the larger issue of housework being the primary responsibility of the working woman has not yet entered the domain of serious debate, even among professional women. Earlier this year some of them formed an organisation for 'Empowering Women in IT' where they discussed the issue of flexible jobs, where part of the work can be done from home itself.

But gendered attitudes at work also need to change. As a very senior woman manager of a software company once said: "If you complain, it is seen as a sign of weakness. If you are aggressive, you are a bully. If you have a mentor or a friend in office, you are having an affair". Many women professionals point out that some men are unwilling to accept women managers. Gendered stereotyping is seen to prevail even in more industrialised countries, showing that the road ahead for us is very long.

For instance, a study report produced by Catalyst, a research organisation, titled "Women 'Take Care', Men 'Take Charge'", shows that prevalent attitudes among business leaders in the USA considered women to be less adept than men at problem solving. Said its President in a press release: "This important study underscores that it's what you don't see and hear that often counts in the workplace. By shining a spotlight on this often unspoken and insidious barrier to women's advancement, it demonstrates empirically how gender-based stereotyping often operates as shorthand for fact and short-changes women in the workplace." This probably explains another fact pointed out in that press release – while women hold half of all professional and management positions in the USA, they are far out-numbered by men in top managerial positions and women account for less than 2% of chief executives of the top 1000 corporations. This, despite the fact that another study by the same organisation found that the top quarter of gender diversified large companies with highest representation of women in top managerial positions benefited their shareholders 34% more than the bottom quarter of large companies.

A more recent study by the same organisation found that companies with the highest percentage of women directors on their boards were 66% more profitable than companies with least women directors.

### **Change Happens, but Where Are We Heading?**

What all of this shows is that gender power equations may be changing around the world, but the pace is very slow and women's organisations and research institutions in India have their job cut out to propel the rate of change.

But which direction is more dominant, what role should the government play in influencing the direction? How much gender sensitivity is the government showing in dealing with this sector, a sector where feminisation of informal work stares them in the face with 96% of working women in that sector, while only 92% of working men are in that sector? After much pressure brought on it from many quarters, the government has finally announced that it will table a bill to provide some minimal social security to this sector. One aspect of the Bill is that in defining employment, it leaves out unpaid work, something that immediately excludes far more proportion of women than men. In fact, the latest National Family Health Survey-3 finds that one in four working women did not get paid, while only 5% of working men did not get paid for their work.

Apart from this, the withdrawal of the government from its basic responsibility of providing equitable education and health for all and the privatisation of these services also affects women more than men in this gender unequal world. When family resources are limited, the male gets a higher priority than the female. There have also been some welcome developments such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act. This has come out reasonably well since it has largely taken note of the views expressed by women's organisations.

But, by and large, when we find that the government is not as sensitive to gender concerns as one would like to see happen, what is the option left open to us? That we now have a woman national president and a woman ruling party president should not lull us into complacency that things would change for the better. Women organisations around the country cannot let their guard down. Their

advocacy action should become stronger and stronger by the day. Academicians have a very important role to play in scientifically studying and bringing out the trends in gender power equations. Our rulers could become more sensitive if 33% of them are women, something that looks like a long way off.

I recall Kamala, a resident of Theni, a district notorious for female infanticide. We, in the Tamil Nadu branch of the All-India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) were conducting a dowry survey a few years back. She scribbled at the end of the survey note: "I regret we did not kill our daughter at birth," And another wrote: "One should not be born a girl. And if born a girl, should not get married. Woman is an accursed being." Isn't it our task to prove her wrong?



# **Institutional Change, Patriarchy and Development**

## **Engaging Analysis, Persistence of and Policy on Dowry in India**

**Praveena Kodoth**

The author of this article is a Faculty member of the Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. In this article she brings out the significance of dowry in today's world. She analyses the various changes that have taken place over the years, in the different segments of society in relation to dowry and marriage, and the impact they have on women and also the various policies that have come into existence to control the practice.

### **Introduction**

The expansion of dowry in the twentieth century to social groups that did not practice it previously or the shaping of a new dynamic to it among those who did raise the issue of its relationship with two overarching processes, institutional change and development. According to extensive and growing literature, people have adopted dowry in the process of assimilation into development and have channelled resources derived from development into dowries in order to achieve socially desirable marital ties for their daughters.<sup>1</sup>

- 1 Dowry has taken root on diverse sites marked by the promise of development such as industrialization and urbanization, commercialization of agriculture, remittances from international migration and transformation of agrarian relations and left political struggle. Dowry is sourced from development benefits such as land received through land reforms and retirement benefits from organised sector employment.

Institutional reform has informed social and economic development in redefining the significance of marriage in the social construction of women's interests and identity centering a modern conjugal ideology that not only re-enforces women's entry into marriage but also, more importantly restricts their ability to renegotiate marriage through exit and remarriage. A new patriarchy was grounded on the notion of marriage as a sacrament, which framed 'Hindu' marriage as indissoluble, where lower caste women previously had access to divorce<sup>2</sup> but also an emphasis on the conjugal relations, wrested from the clutches of an extended family. The political economy of marriage, involved two significant departures from the past: a) in an emphasis on the stability of marriage in conjugal rather than jural terms, where in the past jural stability was premised on restrictions on upper caste women from divorce and remarriage even while men could take additional wives or concubines and b) in that marital stability in conjugal terms is expressed as a function of class rather than caste/ethnicity<sup>2</sup>. Thus, dowry seems to be embedded in a dramatic transformation of marriage, which has rendered conjugal stability into a signal of social class.

Two points bear emphasis here regarding the common sense understanding of dowry a) that it coexists with 'traditional' concepts such as *stridhanam*, b) but also that it suggests a standardization of the notion of dowry and an increasing homogenization of the practice across diverse Indian contexts. On the one hand, the discursive dimension of dowry underlying its expansion constitutes dowry as a norm. On the other hand, the law prohibits giving and receiving dowry. Dowry prohibition was part of the attempt to address gender discrimination, ranging from wife murder, sex selection before birth and discrimination against the girl child. The expansion of dowry

- 2 Kriti Kapila, 'Conjugating Marriage: State Legislation and Gaddi Kinship', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, (n.s.) Vol 38 (3) 2004. Karin Kapadia, 1995. *Siva and Her Sisters: Gender, Caste and Class in Rural South India*, Boulder: Westview Press. Anna Lindberg, *Experience and Identity: A Historical Account of Class, Caste and Gender among the Cashew Workers of Kerala, 1930-2000*, Department of History at Lund University. Jonathan Parry, 'Ankalu's errant wife: Sex, Marriage and industry in contemporary Chattisgarh', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol 35 (4) 2001. Arild E. Ruud, The Indian Hierarchy: Culture, Ideology and Consciousness in Bengali Village Politics, *Modern Asian Studies*, 33, 3(1999): 689-732.

since its legal prohibition in 1961, should be a problem for anthropology, which conceptualized dowry as an essential aspect of Indian kinship.

The conventional approach to dowry normalizes it as an essential aspect of the Indian kinship system. This might suggest that the failure of prohibition is linked to the strong incentive to practice dowry emerging from the system of kinship. At least since the mid twentieth century, the anthropological literature has acknowledged important changes in the practice of dowry and has sought to distinguish the recent practice often referred to as groom price from customary dowry<sup>3</sup>.

Srinivas<sup>4</sup> (1996) elaborates this position by designating groom price as 'modern' dowry, a distortion of custom with roots in modern conditions prominently modern education, organized sector employment and monetization of the economy. Critical readings of dowry have shown that such distinctions serve limited analytical purposes for they fail to engage with gendered power relations implicit in the institution of dowry itself<sup>5</sup>. More recent work takes this perspective forward by engaging with the importance of dowry in the conception of the modern masculine self<sup>6</sup>.

- 3 M.S. Billig 'The Marriage Squeeze and the Rise of Groomprice in Urban Kerala State', *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 23 (1), (1992) pp 198-215; Lionel Caplan, 'Bridegroom price in Urban India: Class, caste and dowry evil among Christian in Madras', *Man*, 19 (2), 1984, pp-216-33; Kathleen Gough, 'Brahman kinship in a Tamil village' in *American Anthropologist*, (58), 1956, pp 826-53
- 4 M.N. Srinivas, 'Some Reflections on Dowry' in *Village, Caste, Gender and Method: Essays in Indian Social Anthropology*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- 5 T.N. Madan, 'Structural Implications of Marriage in North India: Wife givers and Wife takers among the Pandits of Kashmir', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol 9 (2), 1975; G. G. Raheja, 'Crying when she's born, and crying when she goes away: Marriage and the Idiom of the Gift in Pahansu Song Performance' in Lindsey Harlan and Paul Courtright (eds.), *From the Margins of Hindu Marriage: Essays on Gender, Religion and Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. Ursula Sharma, 'Dowry in North India: Its Consequences for Women' in R. Hirschon ed. *Women and Property, Women as Property*, London: Croom Helm, 1984.
- 6 Karin Kapadia, 'Translocal modernities and transformation of gender and caste', in *The Violence of Development : the politics of identity, gender and social inequalities in India*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2002.



In the policy realm, measures taken to address the failure of prohibition have been either to address loopholes in the law or to devise strategies for effective implementation, neither of which has borne fruit. Has policy steered clear of engaging with the incentives people have to pay dowry? How are these incentives shaped? And where do they emerge? In having to attend to this question, anthropology has had to go beyond the conventional frame of kinship to engage with a) the political economy of marriage and b) the issue of male identities and women's subjectivity, a challenge it is yet to confront fully. Women are implicated in allowing and sanctioning the persistence of dowry though they may do so not entirely in accordance with their own perceived interests but because full fledged resistance would endanger them<sup>7</sup>. In this paper, I will engage critically with the multiple strands in the discussion of Indian dowry in the anthropological literature in terms a) of its definition and conceptualization, b) empirical and theoretical rationales, and c) the recognition and rationalization of evidence of expansion in the context of legal prohibition. In the conclusion, I will turn briefly to policy on dowry and examine the questions and challenges that anthropological research raises for existing policy.

### NorthM-south distinction in kinship

The hypergamous milieu of the north was characterized by the inferiority of wife givers to wife takers 'in perpetuity' which meant that the act of giving a bride to a family of equal status rendered the bride giver socially inferior to the bride receiver. This relationship was expressed through restrictions on bride giving family from receiving girls from the bride receiving family in the future and through the flow of gifts substantially from the bride's family to the bridegroom's. Hypergamy was intertwined with *kanyadana* ideology with its emphasis that all gifts follow the bride and nothing be given in return. More importantly, marriage of girls upwards in the social hierarchy brought social status to families, motivating the affluent ones lower in the social scale to dole out considerable amounts of wealth to acquire bridegrooms from higher groups. This produced

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7 Srimati Basu, There she comes to take her rights; Phillips, Amali. 2003. 'Stridhanam: Rethinking dowry, inheritance and women's resistance among the Syrian Christians of Kerala', *Anthropologica*, 45 1997, pp 245-63

intense competition for potential bridegrooms of the higher social status, leading to infanticide and female neglect among them<sup>8</sup>. Even so families of the highest social status had to compete with those below them in seeking bridegrooms of equal status for their remaining girls and thereby had to be prepared to pay bridegroom price<sup>9</sup>.

In contrast to the north, south India was characterized by isogamy or the equality of wife takers and wife givers and reciprocity as the basis of exchange in marriage transactions. This meant that the material burden of marriage was shared and equality in exchange went along with a notion of *stridhanam*, usually comprising jewelry and household articles. Srinivas (1996) excludes Kerala from the south Indian pattern of marriage exchange citing the practice of hypergamy. However, the Nambudiri Brahmans of Kerala did transact a form of bridegroom price, linked not so much to inter-caste hypergamy with women of Nair and other acceptable *jatis* but to their form of primogeniture, which permitted only the eldest Nambudiri brother in a family to marry within the community. Younger Nambudiri's could form *sambandham* relations with women of acceptable lower *jatis*. Polygamy and spinsterhood were permitted and defined the formal options for Nambudiri women<sup>10</sup>. As bridegrooms were scarce compared to brides they commanded heavy dowries.

### Conceptualizing dowry

The anthropological literature provides at least three distinct ways of identifying dowry. First, dowry is discerned entirely in terms of

- 8 Jonathan Parry, 'Ankalu's errant wife: Sex, Marriage and industry in contemporary Chattisgarh', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol 35 (4) 2001; Barbara D. Miller, *The Endangered Sex: Neglect of Female Children in North India*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.
- 9 R.S. Khare, *The changing Brahmans: Associations and elites among the Kanya-Khubjas of north India*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970; Jonathan Parry, *Caste and Kinship in Kangra*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979; David Pocock, *Kanbi and Patidar*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972.; Klass W. Van der Veen, *I give thee my daughter: A Study of Marriage and Hierarchy among the Anavil Brahmans of S. Gujarat*, Assen: Van Gorcum, 1972.
- 10 J. Mencher: 'Kinship and Marriage Regulations among the Namboodiri Brahmins of Kerala', *Man* Vol 2 (1) (1967): 87-106.

the direction of flow of gifts at marriage i.e., all gifts flowing from the bride's family to the bridegroom or his family is considered dowry and any reverse transaction is brideprice.

Second, the substantive definition of dowry relies on the purpose or intent of dowry. This is reflected in Caplan's<sup>11</sup> point that the term dowry as it is used in the Indian context refers to two analytically distinct sets of transactions, the *stridhanam*, a conception of women's property, over which women have rights and bridegroom price, a payment in cash and/or goods intended for the bridegroom and/or his family.

So far dowry was identified in terms of transactions associated with the occasion of marriage, a third understanding moves away from the focus on marriage. This is implicit in the literature and associated with the customary claim that women enjoy to their natal family property expressed in gift giving that stretches far beyond the occasion of marriage to the next generation, as represented for instance in the obligations of the maternal relatives to make material contributions to the marriages of a woman's children. *Theorizing dowry: How do anthropologists explain dowry?* Broadly there seem to be three approaches, which have emerged within the kinship literature. The first approach elaborated by Goody and Tambiah (1973) and subsequently defended by Tambiah<sup>12</sup> (1989) frames dowry alongside inheritance as diverging modes of devolution of property in which dowry amounts to a sort of pre-mortem inheritance.

The second approach derives from the work of Vatuk<sup>13</sup> and Dumont<sup>14</sup>, who suggest that marriage initiates long-term gift giving obligations, including dowry, which form the basis of relations of affinity

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11 Lionel Caplan, 'Bridegroom price in Urban India: Class, caste and dowry evil among Christian in Madras', *Man*, 19 (2), 1984, pp 216-33

12 S.J. Tambiah 'Bridewealth and Dowry Revisited: The position of women in sub Saharan Africa and North India, *Current Anthropology* 30, no 4, 1989, 413-435.

13 Sylvia Vatuk, 'Gifts and Affines in North India', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, ns Vol 2 (9), 1975.

14 L. Dumont. *Affinity as a Value: Marriage Alliance in South India with Comparative Essays on Australia*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.



or alliance between families. They are particularly interested in the persistence of these relations over generations, expressed in and through gift giving.

A third perspective on dowry is articulated in a range of criticism provoked by the first two approaches much of which underscores the gendered power relations represented by the institution of dowry. In response to Goody and Tambiah, T. N. Madan<sup>15</sup> pointed out that dowry may contain a notion of women's property but far from being a form of inheritance, it could be at best a substitute for women's lack of inheritance rights.

### The expansion of dowry

A large number of locality based ethnographic studies have shown that dowry has expanded over the twentieth century to social and economic groups that did not recognize it as a custom<sup>16</sup>. Significantly, much of the scholarship addresses the rise of dowry as part of an

15 T.N. Madan, 'Structural Implications of Marriage in North India: Wife givers and Wife takers among the Pandits of Kashmir', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol 9 (2), 1975.

16 V. Benei, To Give or not to Give... From Bride price to Dowry in Maharashtra, Pondicherry: French Institute, 1995; Brenda E. F. Beck, Peasant Society in the Kongu: A Study of Right and Left sub castes in South India, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press. Bradford, 1972; J. Nicholas 'From bridewealth to groom-fee: Transformed marriage customs and socio-economic polarisation amongst Lingayats', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol 19 (2) 1985; Kathleen Gough, 'Brahman kinship in a Tamil village' in *American Anthropologist*, (58), 1956, pp 826-53; M.N. Srinivas, 'Some Reflections on Dowry' in *Village, Caste, Gender and Method: Essays in Indian Social Anthropology*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996. Klass W. Van der Veen, I give thee my daughter: A Study of Marriage and Hierarchy among the Anavil Brahmins of S. Gujarat, Assen: Van Gorcum 1972; Karin Kapadia, 'Translocal modernities and transformation of gender and caste', in *The Violence of Development : the politics of identity, gender and social inequalities in India*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2002; Kriti Kapila, 'Conjugating Marriage: State Legislation and Gaddi Kinship', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, (n.s.) Vol 38 (3), 2004; Jonathan Parry, 'Ankalu's errant wife: Sex, Marriage and industry in contemporary Chattisgarh', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol 35 (4). 2001; David Pocock, Kanbi and Patidar, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972; Ralph Nicholas, *Ritual Hierarchy and Social Relations in Rural Bengal*, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, ns Vol 1, 1967.

ongoing shift from brideprice to dowry over the twentieth century, expressed in terms of a complex of changes: a) the disappearance of a specific transaction construed as brideprice, b) the emergence of an entirely new payment in the reverse direction and c) an expansion of the quantity of gifts flowing to the bridegroom's family, whatever or not they take the form of a new payment.

### Explaining expansion

Within the anthropological literature, the expansion of dowry has been explained mostly with reference to specific social/economic groups. However, Srinivas<sup>17</sup> (1996) makes a general case but relies on a distinction between traditional dowry corresponding to *stridhanam* and 'modern' dowry, an aberration that traces to the colonial interface, which produced a small but highly desirable segment of bridegrooms marked by modern education and organized sector employment for whom parents of girls were willing to pay dowries in cash or kind.

Several scholars have explained the development of dowry centrally in terms of class, where capitalist transformation generates new disparities in wealth within endogamous groups and wealthy families use dowry as a means of differentiate themselves from those below them.

There have been some efforts to explain the emergence of groom price in terms of caste and the internal dynamics of kinship. Caplan<sup>18</sup> raises the explanatory potential of caste which uses dowry to underscore its endogamous boundary and distinguishes between Christians in the heterogeneous urban setting of Madras. He finds that Christians who retained their association with caste drawing upon a history of conversion as a group, paid bridegroom price and *stridhanam*, while Christians who did not observe caste as they were descendents of individual converts gave their daughters a *stridhanam* but no bridegroom price.

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17 M.N. Srinivas, 'Some Reflections on Dowry' in *Village, Caste, Gender and Method: Essays in Indian Social Anthropology*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996.

18 Lionel Caplan, 'Bridegroom price in Urban India: Class, caste and dowry evil among Christian in Madras', *Man*, 19 (2), 1984, pp 216-33.

### Political economy of dowry

Recent work marks a shift in approach from the concern predominantly with kinship to the political economy of marriage, which addresses the transformation of marriage in terms of the shaping of interests, identities and institutions.

Identities, institutions and practices have been thrown into conflict and renegotiated through international migration. A number of studies on south Indian migrant communities reveal a high degree of variation. Tamil Brahman male migrants to north America avoid dowry but set a premium on the educated and cultured girl from home, while female migrants prefer not to marry boys from home<sup>19</sup>. On the other hand, families of girls finance the education of IT professionals in north America as prospective bridegrooms<sup>20</sup>. Bridegrooms with jobs in the US and the Gulf command high dowries and underpin mobility plans of the bride's families<sup>21</sup>. Significantly, new marriage strategies underline social and economic mobility and secure conjugal ties but have taken their toll on previously emphasized close kin and cross cousin marriage.

While Kapadia<sup>22</sup> suggests that south India has been dramatically affected by changes in marriage, it would seem that political economy has wrought equally dramatic changes among lower castes and tribal groups in north and central India. Middle class Gaddi women, a scheduled tribe in the Kangra region of northern India, exert a new feminine sexual self discipline in the decorum that precedes marriage, in the adoption of widowhood and in ensuring stable marriage, while multiple sexual associations by women at the lower level of the class

19 U.Kapagam, 'American Varan' marriages among Tamil Brahmins: Preferences, strategies and outcomes' in *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol 12 (2 & 3), 2005, pp 189-216

20 Xiang Biao, Gender, dowry and migration system of Indian information technology professionals, *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol 12 (2 & 3), 2005, pp 357-380.

21 Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, *Social Mobility in Kerala: Modernity and Identity in Conflict*, London: Pluto Press, 2000.

22 Karin Kapadia, 'Translocal modernities and transformation of gender and caste', in *The Violence of Development: the politics of identity, gender and social inequalities in India*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2002.

hierarchy are censured socially and publicly<sup>23</sup>. Significantly, the Gaddi did not observe a custom of dowry but have gradually adopted it along with and as an aspect of the *kanyadana* form of marriage.

Parry<sup>24</sup> analyses changes in sexuality and marriage centrally in relation to the developmental state, which disseminates a conjugal ideology through public sector employment. Employment in the Bhilai Steel Plant in Chattishgarh, which epitomized the Nehruvian vision of the nation, changed immediately the terms on which young men access of the lower class/caste access marriage, giving them access to a significant dowry and a girl with a higher social profile but also enforcing caste endogamy and rendering marriage indissoluble. In contrast, casual workers in the informal sector or an older generation of people were more likely to engage in inter-caste and multiple sexual associations. Parry notes that a new conjugal ideal was fostered indirectly through interactions on the shop floor and entry into a new social class but also directly through state protectionism, where the public sector seeks actively to protect conjugal rights and monogamy.

Previous custom had sanctioned multiple sexual associations through serial monogamy, polygyny and polyandry in different parts of Kerala. In drawing up new endogamous boundaries, social reform brought together sub groups that did not inter dine or inter marry till the early twentieth century but discouraged previously sanctioned inter-caste hypergamy. The resort to dowry emphasized dual constraints, a) that these women and/or their households had failed to reap the benefits of development which would have enabled match making without explicit negotiation of property, and b) that such women were at risk of sexual transgression or of making 'love'/self arranged marriages which could be inter-caste and could prove highly unstable.

New gender identities that underpin dowry have been fashioned through intersecting legal, economic, developmental and cultural frameworks. Further, new identities and practices such as dowry have been drawn into the institution of marriage with implications for conjugal relations.

23 Kriti Kapila, 'Conjugating Marriage: State Legislation and Gaddi Kinship', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, (n.s.) Vol 38 (3), 2004.

24 Jonathan Parry, 'Ankalu's errant wife: Sex, Marriage and industry in contemporary Chattisgarh', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol 35 (4), 2001.



## Conclusion

Having set out the important ways in which dowry has been conceptualized and understood in the anthropological literature and also the discussion of its expansion, I will probe these conceptions in terms of that prohibited in the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 (amended in 1985 and 1986). The definition of dowry under the act is

property and valuable security given or agreed to be given either directly or indirectly a) by one party to a marriage to the other party to the marriage; or b) by the parents of either party to a marriage or by any other person to either party to the marriage or to any other person, at or before or any time after the marriage in connection with the marriage of the said parties but does not include dower or *mahr* in the case of person to whom the Muslim personal law (Shariat) applies.

Several amendments were made in 1984, to the original legislation based on the recommendations of a joint committee of Parliament. They included the substitution of the words 'as consideration of marriage', which appeared in the original legislation with the words 'in connection with the marriage' and removal of an explanation to the definition which stated that presents made in the form of cash, ornaments, clothes or other articles did not constitute dowry unless they were made as a consideration for the marriage. Further, to constitute 'a consideration for a marriage' it to be established that the other party had consented to pay<sup>25</sup>. The amendment resolved the latter problem and widened the definition of dowry but retained its reference not only to transfers made by the bride or her family but also in the reverse direction, i.e. bride price. The amendments avoided prescribing a ceiling but instead required that a) both sides to maintain a list of presents received and b) presents made by or on behalf of the bride be of a customary nature and not excessive in relation to the financial status of the giver.

Thus the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 even as it stands amended does not prohibit wedding presents. On the contrary, legal commentators Diwan and Diwan<sup>26</sup> emphasize that 'the fact of the

25 Paras Diwan and Peeyushi Diwan. *Women and legal protection*, New Delhi: Deep and Deep publications, 1995.

26 Paras Diwan and Peeyushi Diwan. *Women and legal protection*, New Delhi: Deep and Deep publications, 1995.

matter is that the traditional gifts made at or about the time of marriage is an accepted practice not merely among the Hindus but also among non Hindus. They have been made from ancient times... Thus our submission is voluntary and affectionate presents are not caught in the definition of dowry and giving and taking them does not constitute dowry offence.' And further, 'in interpreting the word 'dowry' and in distinguishing the same from presents the court will have to take recourse or import the coercive element in dowry, which distinguishes it from wedding presents, otherwise all presents may be treated as dowry or all dowry may be treated as presents. The task of proving what is dowry and what are wedding presents will be a difficult one'.

Let us consider what is prohibited by the dowry legislation in terms of the three conceptualizations of dowry in the anthropological literature. Our first definition referred to customary exchange of gifts in connection with marriage, which the Act accommodates whether it is dowry or bride price. Echoing the anthropological discussion and corresponding to our third definition, the joint committee had noted that 'dowry' was series of gifts given over a period of time before and after the marriage, 'on specific occasions of visits, festivals and ceremonies like those associated with marriage, child birth, initiation etc particularly in the first few years of marriage' and part of the continued relations between the families of the bride and bridegroom. It recognized that these customs brought the bride's family 'under compulsion and heavy pressure'. In terms of the second definition, the legislation accommodates *stridhanam*, which is a customary claim and not subject to force, but prohibits bridegroom price.

Significantly, the legislation and legal commentary virtually import the impasse in kinship literature with regard to the difficulty of drawing up neat separations between *stridhanam* and bridegroom price or what is given willingly and what is forced. The joint committee had sought to address the impasse by defining ceilings separately on account of a) gifts given to the bride, b) to the bridegroom and his family and c) on account of marriage expenses, including betrothal, other ceremonies, entertainment and decorations and anchored the upper limit to the income level of those incurring the expenses on gifts or expenses. Its recommendation that a list be drawn up of gifts received by the bride and bridegroom and registered too was directed

at addressing the uncertainty that surrounds the terms 'dowry' and 'gifts'. The amendments however fell far short of these by a) substituting a definite ceiling with an explanation to section three, which prescribes penalty for giving or taking dowry, to the effects that dowry does not include gifts that are customary provided they are entered in a list and not excessive with regard to the financial status of the giver and b) not requiring registration of the lists.

It may be pointed out that these measures or a more radical law need not work. As of now the legislation retains the scope a) for extensive gift giving and wedding expenses and, b) for the elision of dowry and gifts. Elaborate provisions related to punishment are undercut by the definition of dowry. Sections two and three of the Act read together sanction customary gifts but also through this, allows conformity with a marriage system in which gifts are associated closely with the exchange of women and their double positioning in relation to kinship.

The criticism within the anthropological literature of the position that dowry is a form of pre-mortem inheritance raised two sets of issues: a) in rejecting that dowry could be a form of inheritance it underlined the distinction between them, made on the basis of gender and b) it sets up inheritance as a form of property and power that is denied to women. In this context, the Dowry Prohibition Act represents continuity with a regime of power that relied on the denial of inheritance rights to women and/or to which gifts established relations of alliance, this despite the expansion of inheritance rights under Christian and Hindu law. The political economy of marriage and dowry virtually obliterates any distinction between gifts and dowry but shows that 'dowry' signals a) the value attached to a particular man on the marriage market or b) the security of conjugal protection that can be availed for women.

State policy has institutionalized a conservative notion of family through land reform and ceiling legislations: while all states consider a cultivator and spouse as a single unit, several states do not recognize adult daughters as a separate unit or allow a family additional land on her behalf<sup>27</sup>. Notably, some states also provide grants to women

27 Bina Agarwal, 2002.



from poor households to enable them to get married as a measure to ensure social security to the poor<sup>28</sup>. In setting up the family courts to protect the (marital) family through reconciliation and counselling, legal policy assumes that women's interests correspond to family interests. Not surprisingly, then women's reluctance to take advantage of their rights to inheritance from natal families has been directed at preserving 'kinship mutuality'<sup>29</sup>, and support from their natal families<sup>30</sup> or for fear loss of 'the symbolic space of love represented by their natal families'<sup>31</sup>. Feminist discussion of women's property rights is served poorly by the absence of critical discussion of customary gifts which are implicated a) in acute forms of gender discrimination especially in northern India and b) as anthropological theory suggests, in the denial of inheritance rights to women but permitted by the dowry law.

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- 28 Praveena Kodoth, Producing a rationale for dowry: Gender in the negotiation of exchange at marriage in South India, Asia Research Centre working paper 16, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2007.
  - 29 Amali Phillips, 'Stridhanam: Rethinking dowry, inheritance and women's resistance among the Syrian Christians of Kerala', *Anthropologica*, 45, 2003, pp 245-63
  - 30 Ursula Sharma, 'Dowry in North India: Its Consequences for Women' in R. Hirschon ed. *Women and Property, Women as Property*, London: Croom Helm, 1984.
  - 31 Srimati Basu, *There she comes to take her rights*, 1997.

# Gender, Media and Power

**Ammu Joseph**

The author is an independent journalist, media-watcher and author based in Bangalore, writing primarily on issues relating to gender, human development and the media. She brings out the importance of media in democracy, where issues of public concern are discussed and debated, and where information essential to citizen participation in national and community life is presented. In this article she stresses on the role of media in relation to issues related to women and the urgent need for women's voices to be heard.

## **Introduction**

In this article, I will go beyond the issues normally associated with the broad area of gender and media (or vice versa). I will stick to what I know from experience, observation, discussion and a little bit of reading.

I do not think there can be much disagreement about the fact that the mass media today are omnipresent and omnipotent, if not omniscient. As I see it, the media are increasingly playing the role once played by family, community, religion and formal education: not only disseminating information and knowledge, but also shaping values and norms, moulding attitudes and behaviour, and influencing the very process of living. As the late American academic, George Gerbner, pointed out time and again, the stories the media tell - now virtually around the clock and through multiple channels of communication - "weave the seamless web of the cultural environment that cultivates most of what we think, what we do, and how we conduct our affairs."

Another reason why the media are significant in this context is the fact that the news media, especially, have traditionally played a key role in democracy by creating what is known as the “public sphere.” This is where issues of importance to the public are supposed to be discussed and debated, and where information essential to citizen participation in national and community life is meant to be presented.

The increased commercialisation that is now perceptible in the media – a trend that is an integral part of the phenomenon of media globalisation – make them less able and willing to cultivate and nurture this public sphere, which is indispensable to democratic society. Democracy critically depends upon an informed populace making political choices. For this to happen, it is clearly important that a wide range of political viewpoints, as well as the interests and concerns of all sections of society – including the least powerful – be represented in the media.

In my view, anyone concerned about society and democracy and, of course, gender justice must pay serious attention to the media. The primary reason why it is important to continue to focus on gender and the media was pinpointed in an editorial in the daily paper brought out by gender/media activists during the Beijing Plus Ten review meeting at the UN in New York in March 2005: “Institutions that are not changed cannot become agents of change. Just as gender has to be mainstreamed in government it has to be mainstreamed in the media.” This quote from Jennifer L. Pozner, executive director of the New York based Women In Media & News (WIMN), makes some links between the media and power which are of particular relevance to this seminar. According to Pozner:

“Without accurate, non-biased, diverse news coverage and challenging, creative cultural expression it is virtually impossible to significantly impact public opinion of women’s and human rights issues or to create lasting social change. Indeed, corporate media are key to why our fast-moving culture is so slow to change, stereotypes are so stubborn, and the power structure so entrenched. Pop culture images help us determine what to buy, what to wear, whom to date, how we feel about our bodies, how we see ourselves and how we relate to racial, sexual, socio-economic and religious ‘others’. Journalism directly links and affects every individual issue on the

socio-political continuum in a national debate over the pressing matters of the day, from rape to racism, hate crimes to war crimes, corporate welfare to workplace gender discrimination. By determining who has a voice in this debate and who is silenced, which issues are discussed and how they're framed, media have the power to maintain the status quo or challenge the dominant order."

Unfortunately, despite the fact that the Indian media constitute a huge, vibrant and influential force in society, too few people here – even among intellectuals and activists – pay due attention to them: most seem to be content with wooing the media or complaining about them. The time has come to change this situation. And that is what I shall focus on today.

### **Gender & Media**

Each of these is equally important and, of course, they are inter-related. For example, some years ago many of us assumed that problems with media content would be taken care of if more women entered media professions. Women did start doing that, (especially from the mid-70s onwards) and, over the last decade and more, they have come into the media in fairly large numbers, especially but not only in the English language media – to the extent where there has even been somewhat exaggerated talk of "the feminisation of media".

However, the add women and stir formula did not work quite the way it was expected to. This was partly because, as we all know, gender consciousness is not sex-specific – some women are less aware of gender bias and/or less willing to do something about it than some male counterparts.

Secondly, numerical strength did not necessarily translate into decision-making power. Even though many more women are in decision-making positions now than a decade ago, not all of them are gender-sensitive and, in any case, the individuals at the very top of the decision-making ladder (especially those with power to make financial decisions) are still overwhelmingly male — with a few notable exceptions, of course.

But equally, or maybe even more importantly, many new problems relating to gender and media content have arisen in recent times because of significant changes in the macro media environment. So we do need to pay attention to the larger context in which the media



operate, their own role in creating that context, as well as the impact of the context on them.

## Representation

I will spend only a little time on the first aspect of the topic that I mentioned earlier – content and representation – even though I know that is always a popular subject. Most people will agree that women, who constitute at least half the world's and the average country's population (though not ours), are certainly not proportionately or properly represented in the media today. While certain, relatively small categories of women tend to be almost over-represented, the large numbers that make up other, especially disadvantaged, categories continue to be under-represented. In addition, there is considerable misrepresentation of women, the realities of their lives, their interests and concerns, their opinions and perspectives.

Of course, more or less the same thing can be said about other categories of people who are not among the bold and the beautiful, the rich and the famous, or the powerful and the pampered – including men who belong to various out-groups, however numerically strong those groups may be. But the fact is that even within this context women tend to be further marginalised.

## Coverage of Events/Issues

Take, for example, media coverage of the union budget presented in Parliament in early 2007. As I wrote in an article that was part of my regular series on the media for the India Together e-journal<sup>1</sup>:

‘If there was ever any doubt about the class interests of the Indian press (at least in English) it was safely laid to rest on 1 March, when newspapers devoted vast tracts of their editions to coverage of the union budget...’

From all the rhetoric about the budget and the concern it is supposed to have reflected for the “*aam aadmi*” it was not clear who constitutes “the common man” in the media's view. My little survey revealed that the poor were certainly conspicuous by their absence from budget coverage across all six English newspapers

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1 Ammu Joseph, Whose Budget is it anyway?, India Together (accessible through this link: <http://indiatogether.org/opinions/ajoseph/>).

published in Bangalore. And, even though most papers claimed that the budget was pro-agriculture, no farmers or even agricultural experts were asked for their views. The primary focus of all the papers was on the impact on and reactions from industry, the corporate sector and the stock markets - besides politicians, of course.

Even within this limited area the gender imbalance was obvious. For example, of the seven corporate heads quoted on the budget in *The Times of India* only one was a woman; and only one woman was included among the seven individuals whose "views from the top" were published in the paper – and this, if I remember right, was Indra Nooyi of Pepsico, who doesn't even live or work in India. This is despite the fact that there are plenty of high-flying women in Indian business and industry.

It was also clear that the concept of "gender budgeting" is still a puzzle to most journalists covering the budget, despite the fact that it has been around since the mid-1980s and was first officially introduced in the union budget two years ago. Although gender responsive budgets are not meant to be confined to women-specific themes, nor to advocate separate budgets for women, nor solely to increase spending on programmes specially targeted at women, that is how "gender-budgeting" continues to be presented in the media, if at all.

A more extensive survey of press coverage of the 2005 budget is detailed in the new introduction to the revised edition of *Whose News? The Media and Women's Issues*<sup>2</sup> (which also elaborates on the media globalisation syndrome and its possible impact on gender/media concerns). Unfortunately, there has been little improvement in the interim in terms of giving voice to women and/or highlighting gender-related concerns about the economy in general, and the annual budget in particular.

I hope this example serves to demonstrate how journalism sets the stage for national debates on important current events and thereby affects public perception of issues across the socio-economic and political continuum – not just what are widely seen as "women's issues". To repeat what Jennifer Pozner has said, by determining

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2 Ammu Joseph and Kalpana Sharma (eds.). *Whose News: The Media and Women's Issues*, , second edition, Sage, 2006

who has a voice in these debates and who is silenced, which issues are discussed and how they're framed, media have the power to maintain the status quo or challenge the dominant order.

### **Content of the Media**

Unfortunately, mainstream media content still, by and large, reflects a masculine (and upper class, upper caste, urban, etc.) view of the world and of what is important. As a result many issues that are particularly crucial to women's lives feature low down in the scale of what is regarded as newsworthy. When women do appear on the media's radar, they tend to do so as desirable consumers rather than as full-fledged citizens who are affected by and must have a say in all the events and issues that make news, as well as the many that don't.

Today, in the brave, new market-driven world of Indian media in the age of globalisation, even news is increasingly being packaged and presented as entertainment. As celebrity and lifestyle journalism has slowly but surely seeped into influential sections of the news media, the realities and concerns of ordinary citizens — as opposed to consumers — have been pushed to the margins. There are, of course, exceptions but they serve mainly to prove the rule.

Women are no longer missing from the Indian media, whether as media professionals or as subjects or even sources of news. In fact, the media now tend to be replete with images of and references to women. The question today is not so much "Where are the women?" but "Who are the women?" Also, "When and where do they appear?" and "What are they shown saying and doing?" In other words, "How are they represented?"

The women most prominently and consistently covered by present-day media tend to be, in the main, movie and TV stars, beauty queens and models, fashion designers and impresarios, successful entrepreneurs and professionals, controversial or glamorous politicians, well-heeled philanthropists, stylish sportswomen, and sundry entertainers and socialites — with a few celebrity writers, artists, performers and journalists thrown in for good measure.

In addition, advertiser-sponsored supplements celebrating the 'World of Women' regularly publish profiles of 'the progressive woman' and 'the wonder woman' along with tips on beauty, fitness,

health and travel that appear beside corresponding ads. Even International Women's Day has been adopted, shorn of meaning and placed alongside Mother's Day, Valentine's Day, and so on, as an occasion for celebratory consumption.

Of course, women also make it to the news pages and bulletins as victims of crime or conflict, disasters or atrocities and, occasionally, as recipients of charity or beneficiaries of social welfare or income-generation programmes. However, in the age of 24x7 TV news and sound-bite journalism, their stories tend to be not only oversimplified but often also sensationalised, even dramatised. Indeed, basic professional norms such as protecting the identity of victims — of sexual crimes in particular — are all too frequently flouted. Further, just as the media tend to celebrate individual women "achievers" and generalise their accomplishments, they are apt to valorise individual women "survivors" and gloss over the structural, systemic roots of their suffering.

It appears that women have to be victims of sob stories or heroines of success stories to be sure to catch the attention of the media these days.

Perhaps this is a rather negative appraisal of the representation of women and coverage of gender-related issues in the Indian news media today. I think it is important to balance that by placing on record the undeniable fact that significant sections of the Indian media have played an important role over the years, and especially in the last quarter of a century, in the spread of information and ideas about the status of women in society and the need to improve it.

There certainly has been a perceptible increase in gender consciousness in the media, not only among individual journalists — of both sexes, though especially female — but also, to some extent, within the editorial hierarchy, now headed by members of the 1970s generation that was witness to the emergence of contemporary women's movements in the country. It is another matter that journalists, including editors, are no longer always the final arbiters of media content, with business compulsions increasingly influencing editorial decisions in an ever-widening range of media organisations.

Media coverage has definitely helped to generate public awareness of at least the most obvious of the multiple problems facing women,



such as violence of various kinds. Such coverage has also led to public recognition of at least some strategies to help women overcome these hurdles, especially the less complicated and contentious ones such as education, healthcare, income-generation, savings and credit and, to some extent, legislation.

For example, the media's growing openness to at least some women-related issues could be seen in the fairly wide coverage given to the Domestic Violence Against Women (Prevention and Protection) Act, passed late last year – in terms of both news reports and editorial comment. Of course, some of the reports did tend to trivialise the issue with leads saying: wife beaters beware, and so on. Soon afterwards there were also a number of reports on cases filed under the new law in different parts of the country. However, subsequently there has been little follow up on those cases or on the many problems – including budgetary and administrative ones – that continue to make it difficult to implement the law. And this is one of the problems with media coverage of such issues: lack of consistency and follow-up.

The good or bad news – depending on how one views it – is that the situation is apparently not very different globally. According to “Who Makes the News?” – the comprehensive report on the findings of the Global Media Monitoring Project 2005, released in February 2006 — there has been only marginal improvement in the number of women seen and heard in the news over the past decade (previous surveys in the series were conducted in 1995 and 2000).<sup>3</sup> Women continue to be markedly under-represented in the news, comprising only 21 per cent of all news subjects in the nearly 13,000 news stories scrutinised by volunteers across the world on 16 February 2005.

### **Macro Issues**

My journey into the complex world of media globalisation only began in 2005, when I was asked to write a chapter on gender and media in the information society for an edited volume.<sup>4</sup> It was in the

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3 For more information on and from the GMMP 05 see <http://www.whomakesthenews.org>.

4 Ammu Joseph, Diversity as Casualty: Gender in the Time of Media Globalisation; Anita Gurumurthy et al [eds], In Gender in the Information

process of researching and writing that paper that the penny finally dropped. That was when I began to tentatively connect the dots between my own experiences and observations, and what I had heard and read about the media in India and elsewhere over the past few years. As I did so I began to see the importance of examining and understanding issues relating to gender in the media against the backdrop of globalisation in general and media globalisation in particular.

This is, of course, easier said than done, especially since it is a relatively uncharted territory. While both globalisation and media globalisation have received considerable attention from scholars and activists in recent times, the process of developing a gender analysis of media globalisation is still a work in progress. But it is clearly a process that we all need to engage with and contribute to. It is particularly important I think for scholars in India, with its large, diverse and complex media environment, to provide a perspective from the global South on media globalisation in general and gender within media globalisation in particular.

### **Women's Access to the Media**

The final report of the United Nations Expert Group Meeting on Women and Media in 2002 pointed out that the far-reaching changes brought about by recent transformations in the global media system have "implications for women's access to the media and information as users, for women's participation in media and communication structures, and for the portrayal of women and their perspectives in media content".<sup>5</sup>

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Society: Emerging Issues, UNDP-APDIP/Elsevier, 2006 — <http://www.apdip.net/publications/ict4d/GenderIS.pdf>, p. 122-133.

4. *Participation and Access of Women to the Media, and the Impact of Media on and its Use as an Instrument for the Advancement and Empowerment of Women – Report of the Expert Group Meeting*, United Nations. 2002; URL: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/media2002/index.html>
5. Carolyn M. Byerly, "Women and the Concentration of Media Ownership," in Rush, R.R.; C.Oukrup, and P. Creedon, (Eds.), *Women in Journalism and Mass Communication* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates), 2004, pp. 245-262.; URL for presentation titled "A Feminist Perspective on Media Conglomeration" based on excerpts from the chapter: <http://>

At the moment no one seems quite sure what those implications are, although anecdotal evidence based on more or less casual observation suggests that we need to know more than we do. I won't spend much time on media globalisation per se today, but let me at least quote American feminist media scholar Carolyn M. Byerly on why it is important for researchers and scholars especially to think about it:

"Media conglomeration today, which has no shortage of critiques, lacks a feminist analysis, even though gender is a deeply imbedded aspect of the phenomenon ... It is essential for women to develop a solid cross-cultural gender analysis of media conglomeration ... The absence of gender-specific language and concerns signals an underlying problem in the (media reform) movement and provides a compelling reason for a parallel feminist movement to articulate what women need from a more democratic media system."<sup>6</sup>

What she refers to as "media conglomeration" is also known as media concentration or concentration of media ownership, which has reached alarming proportions at the global level. In 1983 the principal global media were owned by 50 corporations, most of them US-based. By 2002 this had fallen to just nine corporations. Today the figure is about five. Media mogul Rupert Murdoch, who recently added *The Wall Street Journal* to his stable of 175 newspapers and several other media holdings across the world, has reportedly predicted that there will eventually be just three global media giants and that his company, News Corp, will be one of them.

I think we can more or less assume that the growing trend of media conglomeration and the consequent reduction of plurality and diversity in media organisations – very much a part of the media globalisation syndrome — is not good news for gender equality in the media.

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[www.nwmindia.org/about\\_us/centres/feminist\\_analysis\\_media\\_conglomeration.htm](http://www.nwmindia.org/about_us/centres/feminist_analysis_media_conglomeration.htm)

- 6 Carolyn M. Byerly, "Questioning Media Access: Analysis of FCC Women & Minority Ownership Data," in *Does Bigger Media Equal Better Media*, (Report), Social Science Research Council and Benton Foundation, 2006, <http://www.ssrc.org/programs/media>.

For example, Byerly's recent analysis of United States Federal Communication Commission data on women and minority-owned media companies confirms a small but possibly significant decline in women's ownership over a five-year period marked by conservative efforts towards the deregulation of media industries in that country.<sup>7</sup> She believes that the neo-liberal policies that continue to push for deregulation of industries, including the media industry, in the US are further depriving those on the social margins access to the media and, thereby, a voice in public discourse and affairs.

According to Byerly, the first step in the process of developing a gender analysis of media globalisation and conglomeration is to explore how women figure in both macro-level and micro-level realms of media and media organisations. The macro-level is associated with relations of power between men and women in media industries in terms of investment, executive-level decision-making and employment. The micro-level is associated with media content, particularly the representation of women as subjects and coverage of issues relevant to women's lives.

### **Women's Right to Information and Communication**

In this connection, I would like to flag a current, contentious media-related issue here: the **controversial draft Broadcast Bill and Content Code (a.k.a. Self-Regulation Guidelines for the Broadcasting Sector<sup>8</sup> and Broadcasting Services Regulation Bill, (2007<sup>9</sup>)** which the **Ministry of Information and Broadcasting was until recently determined to table** in Parliament during the ongoing monsoon session. **The Bill covers structural matters relating to the broadcast sector, including issues of media ownership, while the Code deals with issues of media content and accountability – in other words, both the macro and the micro levels referred to above.**

The Supreme Court had specified that the use of airwaves was to be controlled and regulated by a public authority in the interests of the public — primarily in order to prevent any invasion of citizens' rights. It had also instructed the central government to take steps to

7. See <http://www.mib.nic.in/Code200707.pdf>

8. See <http://www.mib.nic.in/Bill200707.pdf>



establish an independent, autonomous public authority — representative of all classes and interests in society — to perform this function.

The draft Bill does not respect the Court's opinion or follow its directions in this matter. Not only is the document peppered with references to the central government, but several provisions within it convey the distinct impression that the legislation is essentially meant to enable the government to regain control over the broadcast sector (control that had been eroded over the past decade and a half by the emergence on the media landscape of private broadcasters, both indigenous and international).

The Broadcasting Regulatory Authority of India (BRAI), as described in the Bill, cannot be seen as an independent and autonomous public authority, considering the overarching influence of the government over every aspect of it, from its constitution and composition to its powers and functions. A number of sections in the Bill listing the powers and functions of the central government reinforce the perception that BRAI will be neither independent nor autonomous. Other provisions suggest that it is meant merely to implement policy determined by the government. The fact that it is empowered to make recommendations to the central government means little as long as the latter is not committed to even considering the recommendations, let alone accepting them.

Similar weaknesses afflict the Public Service Broadcasting Council (PSBC) as envisaged in the draft Bill. It is probably important to note that the Bill does pay lip service to gender by **stipulating that one third of the members of the proposed BRAI and two of the six members of the PSBC should be women.** In my view the provisions for women's presence in these bodies is welcome as an effort to achieve gender balance in such institutions. However, I think it is also important to note that gender is not the only criterion that needs to be considered in efforts to ensure inclusivity and broad-based representation of different sections of society. Due attention must also be paid to aptitude and qualification.

I actually think such token references to women are somewhat insulting. Are women supposed to be pleased that

**they are to be included in these organisations? What is the use of representation in institutions designed to have no power in the first place?**

The Content Code also demands attention from women activists and scholars, as well as media professionals (unfortunately few journalists have so far paid serious attention to the draft legislation). Several provisions refer to images of women in the media, obviously reflecting concerns raised by women's movements over the decades (though concentrating mainly on popular questions concerning the exploitation of women's bodies and not so much on other more subtle but pernicious issues). Yet the Code in its present form could be quite dangerous. For one, it is replete with ill-defined terms that can be easily misused to curb freedom of expression.

Despite the many important and contentious public interest matters involved in these draft documents, there is no guarantee that the recently announced delay in tabling the proposed legislation in Parliament will lead to the necessary, authentic public debate. True, the Ministry has promised another round of discussion with "stakeholders" but so far that word has been used as a synonym for broadcasters. True, industry representatives have cited the need for a "genuine, country-wide public debate" in their effort to stall the legislation but they certainly did nothing to initiate such a process after the last bout.

At the same time it is also true that civil society, including the women's movement, has so far remained aloof from this issue, apparently unmindful of the importance and implications of media regulation in a democracy. What passes for debate on news television is often no more than sound and fury signifying nothing, and participation in the increasingly ubiquitous "sms polls" conducted by those channels can hardly substitute for actual public engagement with current events and issues.

The need for public information and consultation is one aspect of the issue that has received little attention to date. Yet the primary objective of media regulation in a democracy is to preserve and protect citizens' fundamental rights to information and freedom of expression. So citizens are in fact the most important stakeholders in media policy and regulation.

I urge everyone to urgently examine the legislation — at least from the gender perspective — and demand a serious public debate on media regulation before any ill-considered legislation is rushed into existence. We know how useless the old, equally ill-considered “Indecent Representation of Women” Act passed in the mid-1980s has been in this respect — in many ways the representation of women, certainly in television serials, has only worsened since that period.

In many parts of the world, people concerned about gender equality are increasingly getting involved in media issues. In the US, for example, the third national conference on media reform in January 2007 saw women media professionals, scholars and activists making a concerted effort to inject a gender perspective into the discussion. Their contribution is sure to be even more evident during the next meeting of the media reform movement in January 2008.

Thanks to effective gender/media activism in Southern Africa over the past few years, the draft SADC Gender Protocol includes groundbreaking provisions relating to media freedom. According to Article 12 of the regional document, “Member States shall recognise that gender equality is intrinsic to freedom of expression, that all males and females have the right to communicate their views, interests and needs, and that ‘giving voice to the voiceless’ is critical to citizenship, participation, and responsive governance”.

According to a recent article by a member of the Southern African gender and media network, GEMSA, the SADC Gender Protocol will place a heavy responsibility on media regulators, public media, media policy makers, training institutions and media houses to ensure that women’s voices are equally expressed on all topics and that women are equally represented at all levels in the media industry.

Maybe we in India can take the first step towards joining and contributing to this global endeavour to ensure that women’s voices are not only heard in the media but also in discussions about the media by responding quickly and publicly to the draft Broadcast Bill and Content Code.

# **Challenge to Androcentric Economics**

**Crystal David John**

The author of this article is a Faculty member of the Dept. of economics, Stella Maris College, Chennai. She brings out the general gender bias prevalent in society with reference to economics. Androcentricism in Economics theory has had an unfavorable impact on women. The author further emphasizes the need for more realistic research in this area to bring about relevant changes from the feminist standpoint.

## **Introduction**

This paper maneuvers through Economics as a discipline and thereby highlights the androcentric bias within the subject. For this purpose the paper is divided into three parts. The first deals with the philosophical basis of the subject and its foundation thereof which has an androcentric tilt. The second part traces the methodology and assumptions within Economics, which has been jaundiced by this ideological viewpoint, while the third part looks at the impact this has made on the lives of the marginalized who largely, happen to be women.

## **Androcentric basis of knowledge**

Knowledge is based on experience and experience is never gender neutral. Hence it is imperative that any body of knowledge must be inclusive of the experiences of the entire human population. Looking at the experience of only one half of the human race leads to the generation of fractional knowledge. Economics is a victim, so to say, of such partial knowledge. Feminist epistemologies provide a far



superior alternative for understanding how knowledge is grounded in socio economic experiences. As Sandra Harding<sup>1</sup> has noted the final goal must be to end androcentricism.

## Gender

At the very outset it must be clearly stated that gender does not mean biological sex though it depends on it. Gender is a social construct or as Julie A. Nelson has stated gender is "...a cognitive patterning a cultural construct on the basis of actual or perceived differences between males and females."<sup>2</sup> Behind this construction is the working of the human mind ..... the cognitive association with the category man and the category woman. E.g. the masculine gender is associated with certain traits and ideas viz., 'a pair of pants', 'more brains', 'practical and independent' etc. This is nothing but what human beings have attributed to a particular gender in one's own mind. This only emphasizes the truth of Simone de Beauvoir's famous dictum: "women are not born, rather they are made." Thus gender is nothing else but learnt traits. Sex encompasses biological differences while gender is what society makes of such differences.

There are several facets of gender<sup>3</sup>

**Gender Roles** – Different roles are assigned to men and women. To cite examples it is seen that women are expected to perform jobs that are family oriented, whereas men are assigned roles that are more risky and outgoing.

**Gender norms** – This implies what men and women are expected to comply with in terms of bodily behaviour patterns. For example women are expected to be patient, docile, and modest while men are expected to be assertive, athletic and independent.

**Gender Traits and Virtues** – often qualities that are considered 'masculine' if found in men are considered to be virtues, but if found in women gets the connotation of being a vice. The reverse also

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- 1 Cf. S. Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986.
  - 2 A. Julie Nelson, *Feminism Objectivity and Economics*, New York: Rutledge, 1993.
  - 3 Cf. S. Haslanger, *Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?* *Nous* 34(1), (2000).

stands good. For example women who are assertive are not respected so too men who are docile.

**Gender Symbolism** – inanimate objects, animals, colour and space too gets gendered. For example toys like dolls are for girls while toys like guns are for boys. So too pink is feminine and blue is masculine. Kitchen is feminine space and garage is masculine space.

**Gendered Dualism** – This is nothing else but dualism that is hierarchical. This brings us head on to the concept of gender bias. In this dualistic structure masculine is looked at normally as superior or positive and the feminine as inferior or negative. Hence masculinity and femininity are largely constructed as opposites. In feminist analysis this hierarchical dualism is often parallel with other hierarchical dualism such as science/nature, mind/body, hard/soft, etc.

### **Economics - The Androcentric discipline**

Economics has been profoundly prejudiced by the high value masculine attitude. This is evident from the very assumptions in the subject. This then is bolstered together by malecentred methodology.

Economics is based on the concept of cut throat competition and is obsessed with profit motive. The classical writers like Adam Smith defined the capitalist market system and advocated liberalism. As Maithreyi Krishanraj writes Economics in the Neo Classical School "...inherited the epistemology of positivism" and "positivism contends that facts speak for themselves without any filters"<sup>4</sup>. The subject hence has no space for collective human behaviour and has little scope for questions covering equality and justice. The Law of the jungle reigns supreme and there is absolutely no respite for those who cannot compete.

It is a known fact that economic theories are partial in its analysis of real life situations. This occurs because such theories have turned their back on women. Subjects that are vital for women, such as their position in the labour market in relation to men, the economic value of household work, and the numerous caring and nurturing jobs they perform have never been part of the scope of Economic theory.

4 Maithreyi Krishanraj, 'How Gender Figures in economic Theorizing and Philosophy', *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 28(Vol. XXXVI No.17), (2001), p. 1426.

In fact as Susan Moller Okin <sup>5</sup> writes “....almost all liberal theorists have assumed that the ‘individual’ who is the basic subject of the theories is the male head of a patriarchal household.”

Economic theory suffers from deeply entrenched gender bias with respect to its content and methodology, and hence it does not reflect reality. Being built on models reality is simplified with a whole lot of assumptions. Such models simply create facts that are fashioned in an androcentric manner<sup>6</sup>. Since theorists in Economics have largely been men, the very content of economics have relegated women's issues, problems and concerns to the background. Men's epistemologies have been reflected in economic theories thereby sidelining women both in theory and in policies that emanate from these theories.

Economics is built on five basic foundational pillars that form the basic assumptions in the subject. These assumptions have led to theorizing in an extremely abstract manner. The models that form the crux of such theorizing are far from reality. The five assumptions are:

Economics centers on the study of the market and classifies resources as valuable and non valuable. For an object to have economic value it must have exchange value. Non monetary economic activity which does not have exchange value is not considered economic in nature. Anything that earns an income is economic work while that which does not is not work from the economic point of view. Due to this assumption non paid work is not looked at as work and women who perform much of such work are rendered invisible workers.

Lionel Robbins' definition of Economics is a generally accepted one. He states that economics is a study of how individuals choose among different limited resources in order to satisfy their wants which are unlimited, hence economics deals with choices made by individuals. It is assumed that each individual has the same objective constraints. Further the

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5 Okin, Susan Moller, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, Basic Books, (1989).

6 Cf. F.R.Woolley, 'The Feminist Challenge to Neoclassical Economics', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 17(1), (1993), Pp. 185 -201.

homoeconomicus individual agent in economic theory is radically separate, independent, autonomous, and egocentric. "The homoeconomicus is the personification of individuality run wild." This individual has no childhood and no old age, in fact the agent has absolutely no history. This then enables the rational agent to transcend reality and thus be equipped to study reality with a clear mirror from the elevated vantage point without being "polluted" or "distracted" by connections and relationships. He is a person as Thomas Hobbes wrote – who has just "sprung out of the earth, and suddenly, like mushrooms, come to full maturity, without any kind of engagement to each other." He is solipsistic and not influenced by the environment. In fact the environment is a constraint. Since women are connected and related to the family their agency has been totally ignored by economic theory.

The individual again is assumed to be totally rational – making only rational choices from preferences that are assumed to be given, only to satisfy self. Emotional, socio cultural or religious factors are never considered, though these factors play a crucial role in decisions that agents generally take in the market. In economic theory as in western philosophy the individual agent is a self sufficient complete individual. Emotions are seen as anti rational and is taken as a sign of weakness or a trait that is feminine, hence inferior. Economics therefore acquired the high valued masculine gender, by steering clear off any affinities with emotions. In practice however preferences are influenced by cultural norms and traditions, collective pressures, ideologies and gender. Economics however does not tread upon such soil for fear of becoming unscientific and soft.

Economic theories are often static. And look at the only short term outcome of economic models, disregarding the long term effects such an outcome of economic degradation, or long-term impact of the distribution of assets within the family or in the society. Since they operate with a given distribution of resources they often tend to eclipse the conflicts of interests within the family members or workers in a firm. Hence the conflict over use of time and other assets between the man



and the women in a household is not taken into deliberation in the analysis of the household decision making.

The final assumption that keeps the nature of economics androcentric is that economic theories and methods are based on the notions of what is 'good science'. Good science has always been identified with masculine values such as objectivity, rationality, and abstraction. Such epistemologies advocate transcending all that gives rise to connections with one another or with ground reality. It advocates armchair research where the mind of the androcentric researcher is impervious to the "disturbances" around. There is little room for values that are traditionally considered feminine, such as irrationality, concreteness and subjectivity<sup>7</sup>.

It is therefore apparent that the very gender of economics is masculine and diverse writers and theorists in the discipline have been anti women in their approach to economics, particularly in terms of the philosophy on which the discipline is built.

Nelson has highlighted the androcentricism within the definition of Economics by listing out a number of contrasts within the domain, methods, and key assumptions in the subject.

The dualism is quite obvious. The over emphasis of the core domain tends to suppress the existence of the margin or fringe domain. Hence the agency of women has been totally subsumed. If one looks at the methodology and the key assumptions one can with ease trace hierarchical dualism, which assigns a higher status to the left side of the list. The left alone however is not representative of economics. There is a need for the discipline to take a more holistic onslaught of economic and social problems that face the human race. By incorporating gender or by "letting gender in" as M. Krishanraj states, one can expect to look for an enhancement in the definition, methodology, and content of Economics.

### **Impact on Women**

Such androcentricism in Economics theory has had an unfavorable impact on women. To underline some such areas that have adversely

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7 Cf. A. Julie Nelson, 'Gender and Economic ideologies', *Review of Social Economy*, 51(3), (1993), pp. 185 – 201.

affected women it is necessary to look at how women have been marginalized.

### *The Invisible Economy*

Since much of women's labour is not marketed and economics specializes in the market economy, they get sidelined. They "labour for love" and this labour cannot be monetized. However the very fact that women work in this manner enables the man to be the bread winner. This however is not recognized. If these women did not exist or did no such labour out of love all household work like cooking caring cleaning (the three Cs), or work such as provisioning for food fodder and fuel (the three Fs) would have to be paid for. Technically speaking therefore women are providing what one can term as LMC or Lifetime Maintenance Contract for their families. If it were not for the social costs they bear it would become extremely expensive for the man to be the breadwinner. In the real world there is a constant interplay between the production economy and the economy concerned with rendering reproduction, care and human welfare. Diane Elson has fittingly defined this, "we have two economies: the economy in which people earn wages in order to produce things to be sold on the market or financed through taxation. This is the economy based on goods, which every one considers 'the economy'. On the other hand we have the hidden economy, the invisible one, the one devoted to care"<sup>8</sup>. What separates the two economies is the fact that domestic work is extremely cumbersome to measure. It is normally carried out by girls and women inside the house and is connected to the market in only an indirect manner. It is regulated by ideologies and norms of the society and is not assigned any monetary value. As explained by Campillo<sup>9</sup>, household work is characterized by indivisibility, non-accountability and non-remuneration. Indivisibility is tied up with patriarchal ideologies where only women are assigned the responsibility of providing the care and maintenance for the household. Such roles have been gendered to be

8 D. Elson, 'Alternative Visions' in W. Harcourt et al. (eds.) *Towards Alternative Economics from an European Perspective*, Brussels: WIDE, (1995).

9 Cf. F. Campillo, 'Unpaid Household Labour: a Conceptual approach' in M. Gutierrez (ed.), *macro Economics: Making Gender Matter*, London: Zed Books, (2003).

feminine and hence stand indivisible. Non accountability is linked to the androcentric content of Economics viz. anything that is not related to the market is not accounted for as an economic process. Women hence get left out since much of their labour is contributed to the unorganized sector. It is non remunerative as there is an abundance of such labour available to perform such tasks freely.

Large percentages of women work in the unorganized sector of the economy the world over. They are very often the main or the only breadwinners in their families. However the definition of the term worker tends to omit part time and seasonal workers hence such women get counted out. These women are therefore veiled in data as described by Ela Bhatt<sup>10</sup> when she coined the term 'Statistical Purdah' to explain how women workers are undercounted by the census and NSSO operations in India. Women's work has always been looked at as secondary. Workers who earn just pin money. Further the socialization of the enumerators too plays a role in the manner they perceive women as. For the average enumerator women normally are housewives even if they work outside their homes for wages. Though the Census the NSSO and the ILO have widened the definition of the worker to include many tasks done by women yet the mind needs total overhauling. There has to be the consciousness within these data office workers as well as theorists and policy makers to recognize and accept women as equally productive workers. There has to be gender awareness in all areas of the economy for women to be truly integrated into the mainstream of economics. For this there has to be a revolution in the thinking process of both men and women. The epistemological privilege women have, to study women must be recognized, for only then can women emerge as agents in the economy. The will to change must exist or else every policy instituted to rectify the imperfect and unjust system will not be followed up by dedicated action.

### *The Globalized economy*

Liberalization means a deregulation of the economy of all varying controls that are extant and which normally takes the form of various

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10 Cf. E.R.Bhatt, *Shramshakti – Report of the National Commission on Self Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector*, New Delhi, (1987).

types of licensing, reservation of sectors, price control, restrictions on the size of manufacturing units, limits laid down to the extent of amounts invested etc. In short it frees the market from the clutches of restrictions and varied controls. Liberalization goes hand in hand with privatization – a method by which much of the publicly owned areas of production pass into private hands. The outcome of such a move is that only the ones that can survive the market forces continue to thrive. The others lose out and quit. For example all soft drinks in India have largely been taken over by one of the two global soft drink giants viz. Coca Cola or Pepsi. In the steel industry many units faced appalling losses due to the competition they could not face with imported steel. Foreign fast food companies are competing with generic food processing units that employ large percentages of women; these women are consequently facing insecure work conditions and are pushed into abject poverty. Hence the process of globalization that has snowballed the economy into the arena of international competition has been extremely harmful to the marginalized groups especially women.

Globalization forms the world economic system by means of internationalization and transnationalization of markets and enterprises. Many years of technological advancement and improvement in telecommunication and information technology have hastened the onslaught of globalization. In this system the market is raised on a pedestal and global markets have come to stay. All this pressurizes people to such a degree that, they either have to respond and keep pace with the global race or else be left out. The rich and the skilled stand to gain tremendously, but the millions of poor, unskilled, semiliterate and illiterate lose out to a very great extent.

Men also push women out of profit oriented market system once the market faces the impact of globalization. For example in coastal Andhra Pradesh fish selling had always been a woman's job. But as soon as fish canning factories and freezing centers were set up, men began to market the fish to these centers.<sup>11</sup> Due to mechanization

11 Cf. Maria, Mies 'Capitalist Development and Subsistence Production: Rural Women in India' in Bennholdt – Thomsen, V et al (eds.) *Why Do Housewives continue to be created in the Third World Too?* New Delhi: Kali for Women, (1988), p 98.



women in the fishing industry have been pushed out of net making as early as the 1980s<sup>12</sup>.

Globalization and liberalization brings in near total destruction to the hitherto protected and subsidized industries. Further any process that is slow and affects the speed with which the goods are delivered in the market tends to trail behind. Consequently cottage industries and handicrafts suffer and with decreasing mechanisms of support by the governments they are all slowly on the way out. It is women who are affected the most for they largely work in such home based industries which are totally unorganized and informal in nature. Globalization hence has a direct impact on their earning capacity.

Since economic theories have not included them in the analysis women remain voiceless. Their agency in the market is fundamentally dysfunctional. Women also lack transferable skills, knowledge about markets and have little autonomy. This along with truncated freedoms has limited their capabilities. Rightly has Amartya Sen<sup>13</sup> "The capability of a person is a derived notion. It reflects the various combinations of functionings (doings and beings) he or she can achieve." Since women are endowed with less freedoms it is difficult for them to rise with the tide of globalization.

Since much of Economic theory has no place for women, such marginalization of women due to changes in the methods and systems of production are not an issue to be grappled with at all in the first place. The philosophy of liberalism is quite clear. The fittest will survive while the 'voiceless', the 'not heard' the indigenous people, the poor and all underdogs and for that matter our basic resource base are not supported, for this will bring in inefficiencies, increase costs and lowered profits. The mad chase for lucrative results has removed the human face from development. The legacy left to us by the Classical and the Neo Classical Economists continues to hang over our heads as the 'sword of Damocles'! This was clearly visible in

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- 12 CF. G. Dietrich, *The Impact of New Economic Policy on Women in India and Feminist Alternatives*, the 4<sup>th</sup> M.A. Thomas Memorial Lecture, (1997) p.7
  - 13 Amartya Sen, 'Development as Capability Expansion' in Agarwal, Bina, Humphries, Jane & Robeyns, Ingrid (eds.) *Capabilities, Freedom, and Equality*, Oxford, (2006).

the infamous Structural Adjustment Policies (SAP) instituted on poor countries as a precondition for loans from the International Agencies.

Women's reproductive and nurturing roles in society have never really been given any economic recognition. Economic theories too have largely been taciturn about this angle of human behaviour. Yet it is quite obvious that there is a vital link between the productive and reproductive sectors of any economy. This became obvious when economies were asked to structurally adjust their expenditure plans and macro economic policies, as a measure to cope with the serious balance of payments difficulties faced by many developing nations in the 1980s. The Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) included short term austerity measures aimed at controlling inflationary pressures and cutting down on deficits. In the long run it involved adopting policies designed to liberalize and privatize the economy. A balance of payments crisis is largely due to the excess demand for tradable goods over its supply. Hence to solve the problem there has to be a shift towards production of the said goods and a movement away from its consumption. Economic theory has argued that this is possible if the market is free to make such adjustments. Hence based on this economic logic the protagonists of the SAP are of the opinion that such shifts are possible if the market is free from government regulation and control<sup>14</sup>. This implies that there is a cut in subsidies; protection of failing or new production units and protection of trade, for such policies interfere with the free market economy. Countries "caught in the web of debt crisis had to heed the market – oriented advice before they could have access to the financial aid they desperately need".

For the sake of efficiency, social expenditure was largely targeted. Expenditure on health, education, and public services was drastically cut. Public enterprises were privatized; price subsidies and infrastructural expenses were curtailed. Many plants were down sized leaving the poor, mainly the women in the lurch. The Structural Adjustment Policies shifted the onus of societal costs of reproduction and maintenance of labour power on to women. Where the state withdrew, duty substituted, and God got used in the mechanism to

14 Cf. N. Cagatay, 'Endangering Macro – Economics Approach' in M. Guitierrez (ed.), *Macro Economics: Making Gender Matter*. London: Zed Books, (2003).

make women take on this burden! As Cagatay writes "Women absorbed the shock of adjustment by working longer hours and harder both inside and outside the household". Hence this feature led to feminization of work, due to the fact that the SAP worsened income distribution. Women found vast avenues of work in the informal sector since they required the means to maintain themselves within the families. They therefore settled for such employment under insecure and exploitative work conditions. SAP has led to women increasing their unpaid domestic labour due to lowering of income levels. Women are also provision suppliers for their families and with the SAP being instituted and the Public Distribution System fast dwindling in size, women have borne the brunt of such policies in India. Further due to gender disparities in the access of food and health care within the home the impact of SAP has been catastrophic for women.

Liberalization and the introduction of SAP in India has led to a shift in income distribution and as Patnaik<sup>15</sup> has delineated such shifts are of four types viz.

1) From worker to capitalist, 2) From small producers to large producers, 3) From domestic capitalists to foreign capitalists and 4) From producing interests to consuming interests. These shifts are indicative of the rich becoming richer and the poor poorer. In the name of efficiency small units are forced to wind up, as they are not protected against competition. Cut in welfare expenditure and anti-poverty programs along with a reduction in social infrastructure have all adversely affected the poor while making production mechanisms cheaper for the owners of capital and enterprise. Deregulation opens up the labour market for women but with a no-win situation: they are relegated to low-skill, low pay jobs. Further they are also the first to lose their jobs when there are cutbacks. With an increase in trade and with WTO agreements such as Trade Related Investment Measures (TRIMS), food security has been challenged. Escalating competition from imported food has forced small subsistence farmers, majority of who are women out of business. They have now to work elsewhere for wages to buy basic food for their families, which

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15 Cf. P. Patnaik 'Macro Economic Policy and income Distribution,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXXII, Nos. 20 – 21, May, (1997), 17 – 24.

otherwise they would have cultivated. The increasing control by the corporate sector over the world's food systems : through the WTO Agreement on agriculture (AOA) and Trade Related intellectual Property (TRIPs) has endangered and deprived women of their rights as the primary producers and consumers of food<sup>16</sup>.

Since women have been jettisoned from economic theory, with the onset of liberalization has not been inclusive of women when the results of such changes come to fruition. Globalization is often clothed in patriarchy. There is absolutely no recognition for women, their contribution or their rights. In fact Economic Theory lends it self fittingly to globalization as both are totally androcentric.

The whole mechanism of outsourcing – also known as BPO or Business Process Outsourcing occurs when the host country producers prefer to get either the whole job or part of the job done by producers in a foreign country. Instead of moving workers in large supply this mechanism moves the jobs to the workers who are in large supply. The reasons are quite obvious...just to cut costs. Especially in India which manufactures skilled labour, this army of workers is then available to the foreign producers at a much lower cost than they could get in their own country. This mechanism does generate millions of jobs but at the cost of the worker's dignity and health. They are expected to work in night shifts so that the developed world could get production for 24 hours without paying overtime allowance. Many of the educated skilled English speaking youth are indeed working in the outsourcing units, but have been reduced to the levels of cyber coolies as they have few or no social security cover, god forsaken working hours, no unions to join, less bargaining power and less job security. Though they are paid well from the Indian standard yet countries like the US pay only a fraction of the wages they would have paid such workers in the US. More and more women are getting placed in the outsourcing unit. Their upbringing which emphasizes submission and docility has let them fit into the demands of the BPO industries rather neatly. In fact, as more and more youth are absorbed by the Outsourcing Industries, fewer and fewer

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16 Cf. EI – R. Lakany *http://www.wedo.org/new/Nov99/wtotradeoff.htm*, (2003).



individuals will go up for higher studies and research. Consequently the toll will fall on R&D in the country. We hence revert back to the days of colonial rule where Indians made good clerks and not thinkers. In the same manner Neo colonialism in the garb of globalization will create Indians who work as clerks once again. And if our educational system changes to cope with the demands of the offshore industries then definitely we will be driving in the last nail on the coffin of original thinking and creativity!

## **Conclusion**

Gendered structures, inequalities and gender differences are integral to the subject matter of Economics. It is important that theory ought to be remodeled from the feminist standpoint. There is an imperative need that feminist epistemologies be adopted so that women are well incorporated and integrated into economic models and theories. Women have been overlooked for long due to sundry reasons. It is distressing to note that though much work has been done in the last two decades to develop theories that look at reality in a holistic manner, yet much of this work has remained in the periphery. Further such theories and studies have not been included into the conventional academic work that a student covers in his or her undergraduate or postgraduate courses in economics in any university. What is needed is an interdisciplinary approach to the study in the Social Sciences. There is an urgent need to theorize anew. What is necessitated is an 'epistemological earthquake' that shakes up the very foundation of theories in economics. Such deconstruction must then be followed by reconstructions based on the whole view of reality not just the partial outlook. There must be a clarion call to abandon androcentric theorizing, teaching and learning of the subject. It is important that there is a greater interaction between the researcher and the researched. This is in contrast to what is afforded by popular and conventional methods in research. This is a challenge the discipline must face upto if it doesn't continue to be a victim of androcentric methodologies and assumptions.

# Re-Visioning Power: A Feminist Task

Kochurani Abraham

Kochurani Abraham is a research scholar in the Dept. of Christian Studies, University of Madras. In this article she discusses the power that a patriarchal society has over women and various systems that have come into existence to subjugate them. She talks of the various courageous women in the past who have fought for their equal rights and advocates relationships based on equal power and space for growth and liberation.

'Power' is an 'essentially contested' concept.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless it is 'the politics of everyday life,'<sup>2</sup> as power is inscribed into every relationship. The question of power has become central to gender relations.<sup>3</sup> A recent episode conspicuously illustrates this fact. Bangladeshi born feminist writer Taslima Nasrin who was in Hyderabad to launch the translated version of her works was roughed up by an Islamic fundamentalist group. Hurling abuses at her they demanded that she be handed over to them. But Taslima braved the attack and reiterated her stand to continue her fight against evil till

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- 1 Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, London: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1974, 24.
  - 2 Stewart R. Clegg, *Frameworks of Power*, London: Sage Publications, 1989, 150.
  - 3 Cfr. Bina Agarwal, Jane Humphries and Ingrid Robeyns (eds), *Capabilities, Freedom and Equality: Amartya Sen's Work from a Gender Perspective*, London: Routledge, 2005, 325.

death.<sup>4</sup> The media acclaimed her as a powerful woman, a woman of courage who is not cowed down by fanatical fatwahs and other threats for her views on religion, sexual freedom and women's emancipation. It also pronounced that her secular feminist voice will not be silenced by such unfortunate events.<sup>5</sup>

A critical re-reading of this event reveals the latent conflicts in relation to power. There is a clash between the system that has dominated over the ages and the powers that are emerging and gaining greater visibility. Up to very recent times, power has been a male prerogative. It was men who conceived, deployed and negotiated power in the socio-economic and political arena and more particularly in the field of religion. Women were taken to be mere ornamented bodies as depicted in Nietzsche's judgment: "What is truth to a woman!... her supreme concern is appearance and beauty." For long, women have internalized this verdict and remained blissfully ignorant of what their powers could be. Thanks to the feminist movement, opportunities in terms of education, employment and the consequent social space, women are re-inventing their identity and learning to name anew their powers.

Women naming their powers entail in Gramscian terms, a journey from submergence to identity, alienation to autonomy, and from contradictory consciousness to critical consciousness.<sup>6</sup> Negotiating this path has not been an easy task, but has meant as we can see in Taslima's case, speaking the truth of one's life with courage and facing the consequences. Women do struggle on this path as there is much confusion regarding what power is all about.<sup>7</sup> There is a need to address the paralyzing powerlessness that continues to cripple

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4 Cf. *The Hindu*, Friday, 10 August 2007, 1.

5 Editorial, *The Hindu*, Saturday 11 August 2007, 14.

6 Gramsci the Marxist philosopher named as 'subaltern' those who are journeying from submergence to identity. This term can be applied to women as they too are on this journey towards identity. Cf. Antonio Gramsci, "Notes on Italian History" in Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Novell Smith (eds), *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971, pp.323-343.

7 The confusion as to what power is finds echo in a very categorical statement about power that appeared in a religious document published in the year 2004 which says: "*Faced with the abuse of power, women are*

women's lives. It is also important to clarify how power can enhance the dignity and life not only for women but for humanity at large. This paper is an attempt to look at the question within the framework of the oppressive as well as the emancipatory potential of power. It takes a feminist standpoint, i.e. looks at the issue from the point of view of women's experience of gendered oppression and their search for a liberative praxis. This is done by exploring into the underlying reality of patriarchy and women's negotiations with power in view of affirming life and true freedom. Attempt is made also to re-vision power by bringing into relief its potential for transformation in terms of building egalitarian relationships and gender-justice in society.

### **The Feminist Probe into the Roots of Women's Subjugation**

It is important to clarify what feminism is in order to elucidate the feminist standpoint with regard to power. Feminism can be defined as a 'worldview or stance that affirms the dignity of women as fully human persons in their own right, critiques systems of patriarchy for their violation of this dignity, and advocates social and intellectual changes to bring about freeing relationships among human beings.'<sup>8</sup> As the feminist concern is affirmation of the full humanity of women, it has identified the notion of patriarchy as one of the key factors to explain what underlies the distortion of this humanity.

Basically patriarchy is about power relations. Feminist theorists explain the term patriarchy as referring to power relations in which women's interests are subordinated to the interests of men.<sup>9</sup> This

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*seeking power.* The document does not explain what this abuse is all about nor does it qualify the delineations of the power that women are seeking. The Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Collaboration Between Men and Women in the Church and in Society*, Vatican, 2004, 8.

- 8 Elizabeth Johnson, "Feminism and Sharing the Faith: A Catholic Dilemma" in Thomas J. Massaro and Thomas A. Shannon (eds) *American Catholic Social Teaching*, (Collegeville: Liturgical 2002) 107-22, here at 108 as cited by Edward Collins Vacek 'Feminism and the Vatican', *Theological Studies* 66(2005)March, 162.
- 9 C. Weeden (1987) *Feminist Practice and Post-structuralist Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 2-3 in Stewart R. Clegg, *Frameworks of Power*, London: Sage Publications, 1989, 150.



does not mean that women are either totally powerless or totally deprived of rights, influences and resources.<sup>10</sup> But, as V. Geeta argues, patriarchy rests on defined notions of the masculine and feminine and is held in place by sexual and property arrangements that privilege men's choices, desires and interests over and above those of women.<sup>11</sup> In the Indian situation, patriarchy is intricately woven into the intersection of class, caste and religion with gender and so we have what Kumkum Sangari calls 'multiple patriarchies' referring to the plurality of patriarchies which is a facet of social disparity sustained by the complex articulation of different religious ideologies, myths, customs and practices.<sup>12</sup>

An inquiry into power cannot bypass the hegemonic hold of religion over women. Hegemony explained by Gramsci as 'elicited consent'<sup>13</sup> is described by social theorists as the most insidious exercise of power. Applying it to women, hegemony shapes their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things and are prevented from having grievances. It may be as Steven Lukes observes, because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or they see it as natural and unchangeable or because they even value it as divinely ordained and beneficial.<sup>14</sup> Thus patriarchy thrives with the active collaboration

10 Cf. Gerda Lerner, *Creation of Patriarchy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, 239.

11 V. Geetha has done an extensive study bringing out meaning and diverse applications of patriarchy especially in the context of the Indian setting. See V Geetha, *Patriarchy*, Calcutta: Stree Publications, 2007.

12 Kumkum Sangari has made an in-depth analysis of how patriarchies cut across all primordial principles of social organization, calling into question the very principle of demarcating communities and personal laws in her essay "Politics of Diversity, Religious Communities and Multiple Patriarchies" in *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 23 (1995)3287-3310 and December 30 (1995) 3381-3390.

13 Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist theorist uses the expression 'egemonia' (hegemony) as the equivalent of 'direzione' (direction) plus "dominazione" (domination). See *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 55.

14 Steven Lukes, *Power a Radical View*, 23-24. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. A. Sheridan New York: Pantheon, 1977, 208.

of women. It is a power that elicits women's consent, beguiling them with its social and cultural myths and rituals, and implicating them in its workings. Cultural and sexual norms constitute the everyday contexts for the exercise of patriarchal power. It is sustained by social relationships and belief systems that justify female subordination and male authority as made explicit in the dependency code of *Manusmriti*, and similar texts in the Scriptures of other religions.

The patriarchal hegemony over women also finds expression in disciplinary power as explicated by Michel Foucault. Borrowing the idea of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon (a centralized structure for monitoring the prisoner's behaviour), Foucault deployed it to bring out the notion of disciplinary power which when internalized, becomes a system of self-surveillance. Feminist theorist Sandra Bartky extends Foucault's analysis to women's gendered disciplinary practices such as dieting, restricting one's movement so as to avoid taking up too much space, and keeping one's body properly hairless, attired, ornamented and made up etc. as expressions of disciplinary power leading to one's own subjection.. In Bartky's observation, women's practice of this discipline on and against their own bodies make them self-policing subjects, committed to relentless self-surveillance. This self-surveillance applied to the politics of appearance she finds is a form of obedience to patriarchy.<sup>15</sup>

### **Women's Negotiations of Power: Bargaining with Multiple Patriarchies**

Even though women cannot do away with patriarchy completely, it is being addressed in different ways. Deniz Kandiyoti calls this the 'patriarchal bargain'<sup>16</sup> which necessarily indicates the way women negotiate power equations. The real-life stories of some of our

15 Cf. Sandra Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, New York: Routledge, 1990, 80.

16 The term 'patriarchal bargain' is coined by Kandiyoti referring to an analysis of women's strategies of dealing with the different forms of patriarchy. See Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy", in Nalini Visvanathan *et al* (eds) *The Women, Gender and Development Reader*, New Delhi: Zubaan Publications, 1997, 86-92.

powerful foremothers and their bargaining with patriarchy in view of discovering their path of liberation can be of inspiration for us.

Rassundari Devi born in the early nineteenth century in a small village of Bengal was married off at the age of twelve. She gave birth to ten children between the age of eighteen and forty-one. In her astonishing work *Amar-Jiban*, the first autobiography to be written in Bengali language, she describes how in spite of the exhausting drudgery of household work and within the confines of petty domesticity, and at a time when education was considered a crime for women, she taught herself to read and write in secret by scratching the letters of the alphabet onto a corner of the blackened kitchen wall. Her power lay in the question she asked herself: "Is this my fate because I am a woman?"<sup>17</sup>

We have Muktabai who was born into a traditionally "untouchable" Mang caste of Maharashtra in 1841. She studied in a school founded by Savitribai and Jyotiba Phule for those considered 'outcasts'. At the age of fourteen she wrote an essay titled "Mang Maharachya Dukhavishayi" which means 'About the Grievs of the Mangs and Mahars'. In this essay she addresses those who hold the reins of power with her own powerful words. She says: "O learned pandits, wind up the selfish prattle of hollow wisdom and listen to what I have to say"<sup>18</sup>. Muktabai's power is made visible in her self-confidence and in the strength of her convictions that in spite of her triple discrimination as a poor, an untouchable and a woman-the third subaltern, she has the courage to challenge the oppressive system of social discrimination and exploitation.

We also hear the voices of subversive power in the medieval *bhakti*<sup>19</sup> movement of Hinduism, where women *bhaktas* do not seek the institutionalized spaces provided by religion to express themselves and women's poetry moves from the court and the temple

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17 See Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (eds) *Women Writing in India, Vol I* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991, 190-202.

18 See *Women writing in India, Vol I*, 215.

19 *Bhakti* means devotion which found expression- as the authors argue- through religious upheavals which mocked pedantry, rejected ascetic withdrawal and emphasized the intense mystic experience of personal devotion.

to the open spaces of the field, the workplace and the common woman's hearth. The *bhaktas* are presented not as social emancipators but as individuals trying to lead a liberated life. The poetry of Janabai (1298-1350) perhaps the best known and best loved of Maharashtra's *Varkari* saints illustrates this. In her words:

"Symbols in hand, a *veena* upon my shoulder,  
I go about; who dares to stop me?  
The *pallav* of my sari falls away (A scandal!)  
Yet I will enter the crowded market place without a thought.  
Jani says, My Lord,  
I have become a slut to reach Your home."<sup>20</sup>

The reverberation of this revolutionary power echoes also in the writings of the eminent scholar and teacher Pandita Ramabai (1858-1912), an orthodox Hindu convert to Christianity. In a reply to a letter from her Christian mentor who was critical of her independent mind, Ramabai writes:

"I am, it is true, a member of the church of Christ, but I am not bound to accept every word that falls from the lips of priests or bishops...Obedience to the Word of God is quite different from obedience to priests only. I have just, with great effort, freed myself from the yoke of the Indian priestly tribe, so I am not at present willing to place myself under another similar yoke."<sup>21</sup>

As these stories reveal, even as women are caught in systems of gendered discrimination and oppression due to hierarchical power relations, their exercise of power helps them to work out their emancipation. Coming to our present times, we see patriarchal structures and attitudes being challenged, thanks to the women's movement which is creating a new consciousness of *stree shakti* or women's power. The success stories of the Shah Bano case where a 75 year old Muslim woman fought her way up to the Supreme

20 A selection from Janabai's poem "Cast of all shame" cited in *Women writing in India*, Vol I, 83.

21 A. B. Shah (ed) *The letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai* (Bombay: State Board for Literature and Culture, 1977) xxx as cited in *Women writing in India*, 245.



court and secured the right to maintenance from her husband who abandoned her in her old age, and the case of Mary Roy who fought single-handedly the discriminative Travancore Christian Succession Act and won equal property rights for Christian women demonstrate this fact. The 2005 Prevention of Domestic Violence Act which came into effect in 2006 is another clear instance of women's collective power challenging patriarchal structures and outlook.

### **Naming Power Anew: Unleashing its Liberative Potential**

While women continue to challenge patriarchy and negotiate power equations, they are also retrieving the liberative and transformative aspects of power. The notion of empowerment is a key concept in this regard. Empowerment is the process by which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. It includes both control over resources and ideology, a growing intrinsic capability, greater self-confidence and an inner transformation of one's consciousness that enables one to overcome external barriers.<sup>22</sup> Understood from a sociological perspective empowerment is strongly political in its meaning as it implies the capacity or ability to transform oneself and others. But feminist analysts also find that like many other important terms that were coined to represent a clearly political concept, empowerment has been "mainstreamed" in a manner that has virtually robbed it of its original meaning and strategic value *and so it needs to be won for a fresh vision grounded in the experiences of poor women.*<sup>23</sup> *The appropriation of the SHG movement of women by groups with vested interests like local politicians and financial institutions for taking political mileage out of them, make obvious this fact.*

Closely linked to the concept of empowerment is the notion of agency, another expression for power put forward by Anthony Giddens. For Giddens, human agency is ineradicably tied to power.

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22 Cf. Sunita Kishore and Kamala Gupta (2004): "Women's Empowerment in India and its States," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 14 February, pp 694-712.

23 Cf. Srilata Baltiwala, "Putting power back into empowerment" in <http://www.madrid11.net/trackback/34195> accessed on 11 August 2007.

Agency depends on the capability of the individual to 'make a difference' to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events.<sup>24</sup> Feminist analysts find women's agency in their ability to make choices and act on them.<sup>25</sup> and as involving social competence in different arenas of action.<sup>26</sup> In this context, women have drawn much inspiration from Foucault's notion of the circulatory nature of power and its productive capacity to create new domains of knowledge and practice.<sup>27</sup> Foucault speaks of the 'insurrection of subjugated knowledges', meaning by the expression, a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated, being unleashed<sup>28</sup> Applying to women, this has resulted in feminist epistemologies, which is an outgrowth of both feminist theorizing about gender and traditional epistemological concerns.<sup>29</sup>

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- 24 See Giddens A. *The Constitution of Society*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984 14.
- 25 Kishore and Gupta, "Women's Empowerment in India and its States", 698.
- 26 See Shobhita Jain, (2006), "Women's Agency in the Context of Family Networks in Indian Diaspora", *Economic and Political Weekly*, June 10, p 2312.
- 27 Foucault Michel, *Power/Knowledge*, (Colin Gordon (Ed.) New York Pantheon, 1980, 98. The Foucauldian argument is against the classic juridical theory where power is taken to be a right, which one is able to possess like a commodity and which one can in consequence transfer or alienate through a legal act or some act that establishes a right. See an elaboration of Foucault's arguments in *Power/Knowledge*, 88-89, 96.
- 28 While many feminists have found Foucault's notion of power a very useful tool of analysis, some have also critiqued his work. Nancy Fraser finds Foucault's insights into power normatively confused as he eschews normative categories, preferring instead to describe the way power functions in local practices. Feminist theorist Nancy Hartsock has questioned the usefulness of Foucault's work as an analytical tool. Hartsock argues that Foucault's analysis of power is not a theory for women as it fails to adequately theorize structural relations of inequality and domination that underlie women's subordination. See Hartsock Nancy, "Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?" *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 82. See Harding, Sandra, *The Science Question in Feminism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986.

With the emergence of feminist subjectivity and women's access to knowledge making, a new language and *episteme* are evolving which are challenging the monolithic and autocratic constructions of male dominated knowledge systems and its relationship to reality.

Women's identification of knowledge with power has found expression over the last few decades also in women's entry into the field of writing. Margaret Atwood's political novel *The Handmaids Tale* is instructive of women's discovery of writing skills. Offred, the female protagonist of the story, holding the commander's pen, realizes why the motto of their centre was "Pen Is Envy" and acclaims: "The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive, almost I can feel its power. The power of the words it contains. I envy the commander, his pen. It is one more thing I would like to steal."<sup>30</sup> The play on words pen /penis points to the phallocratic significance of the word, and of reading and writing which was appropriated by men over the centuries, but now, it is being claimed by women as a means to define themselves and assert their full humanity as thinking and acting subjects. Through the power of the written word, women are critically deconstructing the hegemonic understanding of femininity and are naming not only themselves, but also the world and God according to their experience and from their new subject positions. The new disciplines like Women's Studies, Feminist Theology and the like, give evidence to this.

The liberative potential of power is released also in the naming of power as resistance. Power is generated when people resist oppression whether in ideology or praxis, suggests Joanne Sharp: "Resistance involves power, it requires it, releases it and generates effects of power... and it is only because there is power in resistance that we can be... optimistic"<sup>31</sup> Power as resistance is made visible

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30 Cf. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaids Tale* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987) 241 as cited by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza in *But She Said*, Boston: Beacon press 1992, 3.

31 Sharp, J. Routledge. P. Philo, C. Paddison, R. (2000) *Entanglements of power: geographies of domination/resistance* London Routledge, 31 as cited Mike Kesby, "Rethorizing empowerment through participation as a performance in space: Beyond tyranny to transformation", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (2005), 30 (4), 2048.

in women's movement through the organized protests against discriminatory laws, sexual harassment, and other forms of exploitation. 'Every day form of resistance,' described as the 'weapon of the weak'<sup>32</sup> is exercised when people refuse to believe and live by hegemonic lies perpetrated in the name of caste or gender. Women's denial of denigrating patriarchal definitions as the 'weaker-sex', their refusal to be silenced, but above all refusing to be a victim, are all expressions of this resistance at the personal and collective levels.

Power, as envisaged from a feminist perspective sees partnership as an alternative to patriarchal hegemony. Partnership is about power-sharing. It envisions a relationship of mutuality between women and men and not of complementarity where the roles played by the sexes occupy very different social locations and are unequally valued.<sup>33</sup> Partnership provides space for participation. It can be described as an alternative form of power which constitutes an agency capable of outflanking dominant frameworks of power.<sup>34</sup> Partnership implies power equations where the involvement and contribution of both the sexes are deemed essential both in the domestic and public space for the growth of humanity.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that power is central to human life, but the growth and wellbeing of humanity depends on how it is exercised. The feminist re-visioning calls for a shift from the 'power-over' to

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32 The term 'everyday forms of resistance' was coined by James C. Scott pointing to the exercise of power by peasants in their struggle to confront the hegemony of the ruling classes is applicable to women. See James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985. *Weapons of the Weak*, 30-34.

33 V. Geetha argues that patriarchal spatial strategies come to the fore in arguments of 'complementarity' of roles in male-female relationships. See V. Geetha, *Patriarchy*, 132.

34 Cfr. Desbiens Caroline, "Feminism 'in' Geography: Elsewhere, Beyond and the Politics of Paradoxical Space," *Gender, Place and Culture* 6 (2): 179-85, as cited by Mike Kesby, "Retheorizing empowerment through participation as a performance in space: Beyond tyranny to transformation", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (2005), 30 (4), 2048.



the 'power- with' approach which implies a 'politics of inclusion'. This shift is realized only when women and men learn to undo the internalized patriarchal conditioning and create space for growth and liberation for themselves and others. "Liberation is a way of talking about power" argues Ackerman.<sup>35</sup> Feminism aims at this liberation not only for women but for all who continue to be crippled and marginalized by the caste, class and other oppressive divisions in society. For the integrity of life on this planet it is crucial that we enter into right relationships with each other and with the rest of creation and it is the feminist vision that this dream be realized through a culture of partnership.

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35 Bruce A. Ackerman: *Social Justice in the Liberal State*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980,6

# Religious Power and Women's Negotiations

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The author is the President of the Faculty of Arts, State University of Madras, and Chairperson of the School of Philosophy and Religious Thought of the same University. In this articles, after analysing different forms of power, he shows with examples from various religious traditions, how women are changing the traditional power-structures of religion which support patriarchy. The negotiations of power they make contribute to regain their full humanity. The negotiations relate to re-interpretation of religious resources and doctrines; agency in rituals; transgression of 'sacred spaces; challenge to priestly power, and reappraisal and affirmation of their bodies as sites of power.

As in most other realms, religions are ambiguous also in the realm of power. This ambiguity is most evident in the case of women. The power that envelops religion in the name of the sacred is overwhelming, and it informs every sphere of life. As a result, cultural forms, social behaviours and everyday practices are under the pervasive influence of religious ideology and legitimisation. The most important means of oppression of women is patriarchy, which receives much of its ideological ammunition from religion, its beliefs, injunctions, customs and rituals.<sup>1</sup>

In this article we shall study how women are confronted with different forms of power, often religiously sanctioned, and how they go about negotiating it, and what strategies they deploy to challenge, to scuttle, to undermine and to circumvent oppressive forms of power,

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1 On then nexus between gender and religion in the Indian context, see Julia Leslie – Mary McGee, *Invented Identities. The Interplay of Gender, Religion and Politics in India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2000.

and how they succeed to channel other aspects of religious power to change and transform themselves, others and society in a given context. This is what is meant here by “negotiations”. The power of patriarchy over them is so repressive, and the structures of the society and the force of tradition so rigid, that women cannot in every instance resist the religiously sustained patriarchy and its power.

It is remarkable that women find ingenious ways to go about power, and are able to invent new spaces and avenues to exercise their subjecthood and agency. Moreover, in everyday practice, women navigate deftly the interstices between defiance and acquiescence to the existing order, which, though does not bring about desired full freedom, nevertheless carries into their lives a modicum of autonomy and respect. By negotiating power, women are able to benefit the people around them and the entire community. They are also able to create a new awareness. The negotiation of power by women is happening everyday to which patriarchy is blind. In women’s negotiation of power nobody is belittled. This is different from the patriarchal mode of exercise of power in which some are winners and others are losers. Patriarchy reproduces the existent system and reinforce hierarchy. As a result, some benefit through their domination, and others loose. This is true also of the realm of religion, on which is this article focussed. We shall begin our reflections by analysing some basic conceptions of power.

### **Forms of Power – An Analysis**

Given the importance of power in every domain of life, there has taken place a lot of theorizing on it and the way it operates. The most widespread understanding of power views it as “power over” which creates a relationship of domination and subjugation. Hierarchy is a system of power of this kind. This form of power as dominion has its own cultural and social mechanisms of functioning and institutions which sustain it. In other words, it is a practice that is bound up with our social and cultural practices of everyday and the entire society is involved in it. Quite different is a second conception of power which can be characterized as “power to”. This means that a person or a group is able to act without coercion. This understanding of power has a positive connotation, since it enables people to act autonomously, make their choices and achieve the goals they have chosen freely.

This is the power that is necessary for every person to live and flourish by bringing out the inherent potentialities. A third conception of power views it as "power with". It highlights the collective dimension of power. Power is not what an individual possesses or loses; it is something that derives from being together. In this sense, solidarity is an expression of power. The subalterns and other weaker sections do not possess power individually, and yet could be powerful as a collective entity. The fourth understanding of power is "power within". It refers to the kind of power that a person has within oneself, no matter what the external circumstances are. As Manju Kar, an ordinary Bengali woman put it,

Power is not necessarily what we experience in our social and professional status. It has also much to do with what I feel inwardly. Divine mother is reflected in me, as such; power is in me.<sup>2</sup>

It is a power that is connected with the subjecthood and agency of a person. It gives self-confidence to a person to face the external situation. As we shall see below in this article, this form of power is highly significant for women and for their well-being.

Women's approach to power is much broader than the patriarchal understanding and practice of it. The only conception of power in patriarchy is "power over", whereas a feminist approach to power is one which valorises the other three forms of power and on that basis is able to challenge the patriarchal power of domination. In this sense, as Foucault rightly points out, power circulates in the capillaries of the social body where every one exercises it according to his or her capability.

### **Caste and Patriarchy**

All religious traditions, in varying degrees, subject women to patriarchal power. Patriarchy is strongly entrenched also in the exercise of religious authority. In India, the "brahminical patriarchy", upheld by religious scriptures and ideologies, is embedded in the caste system. Just like the religious legitimization of caste, patriarchy also gets ideological sanction. What we need to particularly note – and

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2 As quoted in Lina Gupta, "A Hindu Woman's Journey", in *Concilium* 2006/3, p. 95.



which is absent in most studies of women till recently – is the nexus between caste and gender. If feminine is a social and cultural construct, this construction is undergirded and maintained by the caste-system. Women as guardians of tradition become also those who maintain the purity of the caste by scrupulously observing the rules and injunctions of the caste. This is one more reason by which the space of women within the private realm is circumscribed.<sup>3</sup> The mutual shaping of caste and gender is sealed by endogamy which restricts the exchange of women within the same caste or clan. As Uma Chakravarti points out,

The term ‘brahminical patriarchy’ is a useful way to isolate this unique structure of patriarchy, by now dominant in many parts of India. It is a set of rules and institutions in which caste and gender are linked, each shaping the other and where women are crucial in maintaining the boundaries between castes...[C]aste hierarchy and gender inequality are maintained through both the production of consent and the application of coercion.<sup>4</sup>

Given the importance of maintaining the purity of caste for which women are crucial, it follows that ‘brahminical patriarchy’ tried to control women by controlling their sexuality, and consequently creating a cultural and social mores that is intolerant of the subjecthood, free choice and autonomy of woman. The control of the sexuality of woman takes on the subtle form of pativrata ideal. It eulogizes loyal submission

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3 In this connection, it is interesting to note that in the nineteenth century colonial India, nationalists and social reformers highlighted the inner and spiritual superiority of India in contrast to the material West. As for the colonialism, it was maintained that, though India is materially subjected to the West, the West could not conquer the inner and spiritual self of the nation. Now, the inner realm untainted by the external developments was represented by women. They were the unconquered territory of the colonizers. To maintain women in that status was to tie them down to the millennial traditions. Therefore, in spite of the reforms advocated in favour of women, there were not many who thought of the subjecthood of women, their identity and autonomy.

4 Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste. Through a Feminist Lens*, Stree, Calcutta, 2006, p.34; see also ID., *Rewriting History. The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*, Kali for Women, Delhi, 2000..

to the husband and extols motherhood with which being woman is sought to be identified.<sup>5</sup> This is done with the ideological aid of religious beliefs and narratives in epics and puranas. The proscription of varnasamkara (mixing of castes) was particularly stringent with regard to women, whose defilement in this way was viewed as a portent of the times of cataclysmic disasters or kalyuga.

### Virgins – “Female Men of God”

In spite of the fact that Christianity proved attractive to women in its origins, since it provided alternative ways of life for them and for their self-expression, it has also contributed its share to the patriarchal domination of women in various ways. To recall some of the aspects, a misinterpreted anthropology, under the influence of certain Christian tradition, saw woman inferior to man (cf. 1Cor 11:8-11). Even an otherwise highly enlightened figure like Thomas Aquinas could see in woman nothing but a defective male. Misogyny became part of spirituality and asceticism. Again, a false interpretation of original sin, made women the source of evil and moral deprivation. Body and soul were not dichotomised in Christianity, as is generally believed. Rather, body and soul were seen so intimately in union that whatever affects the body was thought to affect the soul and its salvation.<sup>6</sup> Since women were identified with body, sensual association and sexual relation with them was viewed as a compromise with the soul and its salvation. As for women, salvation meant renouncing to their nature so bound up with body. Virginity became the supreme ideal for women, precisely because through sexual renunciation they rise above their nature and become truly “men of God”. As Mary T. Malone observes,

Virginal women have become male and have learnt to practice ‘manly virtues’. In this way, they assure their eternal salvation because, in the next life, all will be male. Besides, having a virgin in the family guaranteed the salvation of all. The consecrated virgin is an example to all of the human being as

5 Cf. V. Geetha, *Patriarchy*, Stree, Calcutta, 2007. .

6 Cf. Jean-Guy Nadeau, “Dichotomy or Union of Soul and Body?”, in *Concilium* 2002/2, pp. 57-65.

she came from God's hands. Her body remains intact, without penetration of any kind.<sup>7</sup>

It is easy to see how the devaluation of sexuality meant in the Christian tradition also depreciation of woman, unless they took on the life of virginity and continence.

Medieval Christianity presents contrasting picture of valiant and unconventional women on the one hand, and the effort to control any expression of women's independence, on the other. The infamous witch-hunting illustrates how women who sought to be themselves could easily be labelled as "witches" and burnt at stakes. What transpires from Christian history is that the preoccupation with orthodoxy and its defence did not aid the cause of women. On the contrary, it meant often the development of anti-feminine attitudes and practices. The emergence and consolidation of clericalism sealed the fate of women as obedient subjects – without identity and selfhood of their own – to be deployed for whatever purpose or service the religious patriarchy thought them fit to be.

I have tried to sketch in very broad terms some of the expressions of religious patriarchy from two traditions – Hinduism and Christianity – by way of example as how women are subjugated and dominated over. What is important to note is that religious traditions have developed ideologies, institutions, rituals, customs and practices which all serve to disempower women. But then, women have found, as I noted earlier, ways and strategies to negotiate the power exercised over them by the patriarchal control of religions. We could make a study of this from a historical perspective which is not my intention here. Nevertheless, let me recall here two towering women of nineteenth century who were able to negotiate the power-hold of religion over women – Pandita Ramabai and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Ramabai was equally critical of brahminical patriarchy and Christian clericalism, and Stanton produced the celebrated "Women's Bible" to enhance the negotiating power of women in the Christian religious sphere.

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7 Mary T. Malone, *Women and Christianity*, Orbis Books, New York, 2001, p. 150; see also Elizabeth A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, Michael Glazier, Wilmington, 1983; Peter Brown, *The Body and Society. Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1988.

Instead of going into history, what I propose here is to present some of the ways in which women today negotiate power in the religious realm and how they invent alternative spaces of power.

### Re-reading of Religious Sources

Since patriarchy has recourse to religious scriptures to legitimise the control of women and their subjugation, women in all religions are re-reading these sources from a feminist perspective, resulting in a challenge to the patriarchal interpretation of these sources. In this way, women strike at the very root of ideological validation of dominion over them. Let me highlight here the process that has taken place in Christianity by way of women's negotiation of power.

Bible – the Old Testament and the New Testament – forms the basis of Christian beliefs and practices. This is true also in what touches upon women. We could distinguish three orientations in the re-reading of scriptures. There are women who think that the scriptures are so dominated by patriarchy that they will not serve the cause of women. They turn to other sources for their liberation. A second orientation is represented by those who highlight the women characters and their stories in the Bible, and these are amply made use of in the context of Christian worship. This way of approaching scriptures does not go into any analysis of the way women are presented and the social and cultural conditionings behind the sacred texts in what concerns them. A third orientation is espoused by feminists who go into deeper explorations of the scriptural statements and narrations. They take a critical approach to the scriptures and begin their interpretation by applying the hermeneutics of suspicion. When tradition and interpretation in the past have worked against women's cause, it is legitimate that their approach to scriptural resources begins with hermeneutics of suspicion. By delving into the Christian origins, they highlight the historical agency of women. They sift the patriarchal elements and cultural conditionings inherent in the texts and narrations. A re-reading of the scriptures from the perspective of women, their concerns and experiences bring out an empowering and challenging message that breaks the patriarchal interpretation and control of the Bible.<sup>8</sup>

8 Cf. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her. A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. Crossroad, New York, 1994. See also Kwok Pui-Lan and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Women's Sacred



One of the strategies employed to break loose of patriarchal control is imagination. By this is not meant any "subjective" and arbitrary interpretation by women. If the traditional interpretation of the role of woman and her identity is highlighted from cultural and patriarchal understanding of femininity, in feminist imagination these are resisted and challenged, and new ways are explored to interpret and bring out the identity and agency of women. Rereading the texts and narrations with imagination helps them to see how women in the Bible have negotiated power which in turn helps them to negotiate power in their daily lives.

Let me illustrate this with few examples from the Old and New Testaments. In the Biblical tradition we have several examples of women who emerged as powerful leaders by employing strategies of inversion with the purpose of ensuring justice for the marginalized groups they represented. Esther is one such who did not keep quiet in the face of the calamities that fell on the Jewish people in exile, but used her beauty to ably negotiate and argue with the king to save her people (Esther 1 – 4). She wins a beauty-contest and gets into the centre of power by not disclosing her Jewish identity to a king who was bent on their destruction. Crowned as queen, she was able to deal with the king with courage and boldness.<sup>9</sup> Another striking case

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Scriptures" *Concilium* 1998/3; on the cultural conditioning of patriarchal domination in Christian scriptures, see, Esther Fuchs, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative. Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 2000.

- 9 Another significant figure in the story is queen Vashti. King Ahasuerus who ruled over the entire region between India and Ethiopia, arranged for a sumptuous banquet for all the officials, nobles and governors from his entire kingdom. This was an occasion for him to exhibit all his fabulous riches. Not satisfied, he wanted to show to the guests something very precious he possessed – the beauty of his queen Vashti. He commands her to appear before his guests and show off her beauty. According to some commentators, it is to be inferred that she was to appear naked. But the queen refused the king's bidding, for she wanted to be herself and not an object of beauty or show-piece to be exposed to the ravenous eyes of the males. Her principled defiance led to her being deposed as queen. For the interpretation of the story of Esther and queen Vashti, see Andre Lacocque, *The Feminine Unconventional*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1990, pp. 50-83; see also James WG. Williams, *Women Recounted. Narrative Thinking*

is that of the Cananite woman in the New Testament and her negotiation of power (cf. Mk 7:24-30; Mt 15:21-28). Being a gentile woman and not a Jew, she was in a very disadvantageous position. She argues with Jesus when he showed reluctance to respond to what she wanted for her child. Two things happen in her dealing with Jesus and argumentation with him. She makes Jesus aware of his bias as a Jew towards the gentiles to whom she belonged (cf. Mk 7:27). Secondly, as a result of her negotiation, she was able to get what she needed – the healing of her daughter.

In interpreting the scriptural resources, feminist scholars depart from the understanding of power and authority as dominion over. In feminist interpretation, power and authority are centred on community, and understood in terms of partnership. As Letty Russell notes,

The emerging feminist paradigm trying to make sense of biblical and theological truth claims is that of authority as partnership. In this view, reality is interpreted in the form of a circle of interdependence. Ordering is explored through inclusion of diversity in a rainbow spectrum that does not require that persons submit to the “top”, but rather, that they participate in the common task of creating an interdependent community of humanity and nature. Authority is exercised in community and tends to reinforce ideas of cooperation, with contribution from a wide diversity of persons enriching the whole.<sup>10</sup>

### Re-interpreting Religious Tenets

If “the symbol of God functions as the primary symbol of the whole religious system, the ultimate point of reference for understanding experience, life and the world”,<sup>11</sup> it is of utmost importance in what way God is imagined and presented. The fact is that the dominant image of God in the Judeo-Christian tradition and

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and the God of Israel, The Almond Press, Sheffield, 1982; Letty M. Russell (ed.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1985.

10 Letty M. Russell, “Authority and the Challenge of Feminist Interpretation”, in Letty M. Russell (ed.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1985, p. 144.

11 Cf. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is. The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 2002, p. 4.

in daily practice is androcentric; divine mystery is masculinized and named with male designations. It is often argued that naming God in male terms, is not to be taken literally. If that is the case, it is not understandable why there should be objections when God is referred with female designations. It only shows that God-talk has deeper ideological implications. Speaking of God in male terms often implies that it is the male who is representative of God, and therefore is the holder of power; he is master and ruler over women. The masculine image of God has led also to the monopoly of leadership by men in Christian tradition and practice up to our day. As Anne Carr observes,

The idol of male divinity in heaven issues in a divinising male authority, responsibility, power, and holiness on earth, despite pious avowals of religious leaders about women's equality. For the symbolism is so deeply embedded in Christian theology, church structure, and liturgical practice that the Christian imagination unconsciously absorbs its destructive and exclusionary message from childhood on.<sup>12</sup>

How justified is this male discourse of God with all its ideological implications and ethical consequences? Even if it is speaking about divine mystery, when women who are created equally in God's image (Gen 1:27), are left out, it is sinful sexism. Rosemary Ruether calls it "idolatry" – the most detestable sin in the Semitic religious traditions.<sup>13</sup> How else could the exclusion of women and their experience from the approach and understanding of the divine be characterized? The attempt to name the unnameable divine mystery through the experience of woman is basically a recognition of their dignity as human persons and valorisation of their distinctive experience.

Obviously, the presentation of the divine mystery as male has served to consolidate patriarchal system and its claims. For women, negotiation of power means a challenge to the very approach to the divine exclusively through male experience and symbols. This is no easy task. For, the male image of the divine is so widespread and is

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12 Anne E. Carr, *Transforming Grace*, Continuum, New York, 1998, p.p. 138-139.

13 Rosemary Radford-Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk. Toward a Feminist Theology*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1983.

deep-rooted. Christian feminist theologians negotiate with the power that traditional male image of God represents. Some of them show how the male image of God is to be complemented by images in the scriptures which speak of the maternal traits of God (cf. Is 66:13). This is seen as an attempt to carve out some small space for women in what is dominantly a male image of God. Others go a step further and show that in the divine ontological reality itself there is the feminine of the Spirit. In this way, "we end up with two clear masculine images and an amorphous feminine third".<sup>14</sup> These two approaches are found not adequate to really negotiate the dominant andocentric images and approaches to God. Hence, other feminists have highlighted the mystery of God as that of Sophia or wisdom.

If the human imaging of the heavenly realities reflect earthly experiences, this is very true of Hinduism. The reality of male and female are reflected in the divine realm with male deities and female goddesses. Even more, there is no border between the world of the human and the divine; on the contrary, both these realms interpenetrate each other. Even though, more than any other religion, Hinduism is attentive to the feminine in the divine, with innumerable goddess figures, however, when it comes to negotiation of power by women, these very images of goddesses could inspire a subordination under patriarchical ideology. In fact, in the mainline Sanskrit tradition, female deities like Sita, Lakshmi, Parvathi are consorts of male deities, and the virtues and ideals surrounding these female deities are not very different from what are projected as ideals for a woman or for a wife. What we observe, then, is that the mere acknowledgement of goddesses does not contribute to empower women.

However, there is another stream of Hinduism in which village goddesses (gramadevata) are associated with subaltern people. Here goddesses are not consorts of male divinities, but are independent; they exude power and compassion, and have agency of their own. A goddess is deeply rooted in the village; even more, she is seen as married to the village whose protector and guardian she becomes.<sup>15</sup>

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Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ibid.* p. 50.

Cf. David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses. Vision of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Traditions*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi-Varanasi, 1986, pp. 197 ff.



Obviously, highlighting of this image of goddesses has great potential for women to negotiate the issue of power in daily lives against the strongly entrenched patriarchal system.

### **Life-cycle Rituals and Negotiation of Power**

Rituals have strong symbolic overtones and are repository of sacred as well as social power. If it is the experience of women that they are excluded from this symbolic realm, on the other hand, they are the central figures in some areas of religio-cultural practices. One such realm is that of life-cycle rituals. In South India, an event like menstruation is not something that is hidden from the eyes of the public; rather something that is celebrated. In this as well as in rituals connected with pregnancy, women play important ritual roles. The negotiation of power does not consist merely in women being ritual agents. There are other important dimensions to these rituals. In spite of the many ambiguities surrounding them, these rituals succeed to give women at least momentarily a sense of power, respect and attention. These rituals are important, because through them, the entire family of the girl or woman gains “mathippu” or self-esteem in the society.<sup>16</sup> Secondly, the bodies of women are affirmed and celebrated in these rituals – bodies which otherwise are insulted and often humiliated as source of pollution and as object of shame. The way women’s bodies are dressed and ornated during menstrual and pregnancy rituals and the way they are fed on these occasions bring to expression the worth of their bodies. Life-cycle rituals stand out as sites where women negotiate power, especially if we contrast this with the daily drudgery of life in which their bodies are exploited and humiliated. Thirdly, these life-cycle rituals provide women a sense of well-being and auspiciousness. Celebrating the puberty rituals highlights the generative power of woman as the one who has the potential to bring forth new life, and in this she is viewed akin to the Divine in its mysterious creative power.<sup>17</sup> Finally, these life-cycle

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16 Cf. Theresiamma Thomas, *Women and Rituals. A Critical Inquiry into the Religious-Cultural Practices of Catholic Women of Dalit Origin in Tiruvallur District,, Tamilnadu* (unpublished doctoral dissertation written under my guidance at the University of Madras, 2007).

17 Obviously, one may view these rituals as reducing the role of women to reproduction or see them as events heightening the honour of men. Certainly,

rituals create in women an empowering inner state of mind. This subjective basis of power could be present even in conditions of the absence of objective basis of power such as economic means, legal entitlements, etc.

To these life-cycle rituals we need to add explicit religious rituals women – especially women from the lower castes and classes – perform. Empirical data show that the religious rituals at home are performed mostly by women. The religious practices they do, prove to be a source of inner power in the case of many women who, thanks to their religious rituals, have shown the ability to negotiate power in the external realm. The fasting they do, the vow they take and the pilgrimage they go to, become means for them to negotiate the realm of power that weighs in every sphere of life against them.

Females are also becoming religious specialists and conduct life-cycle rituals, even though males are temple-priests and leaders of most public rituals. Hindu women have considerable religious involvement. Women alone perform a large number of calendrical rituals, women's participation in the life-cycle rituals is definitely a part of the little tradition. The sexual segregation of Hindu society also articulates with the role that religion plays in drawing women together. Female solidarity is continuously reinforced through religious practices.<sup>18</sup>

Obviously, we do not conclude that religious practices bring a solution to the powerlessness of women. This could only lend substance to the claim that religion alienates women from the material realities of life and power. But it is undeniable from the perspective of the subjecthood of women, these practices of which they themselves

these rituals do not challenge the patriarchal system in toto or its dominance in ritual realm. That is why some women play down traditional puberty rituals which gives the false notion of women's bodies being identified with fertility and procreation. What these life-cycle rituals highlight are flashes of power that women gain and they could be viewed as strategies to negotiate power in a world and society in which the ritual realm is controlled almost entirely by men, and more specifically by the priestly caste or class. That is why some women play down traditional puberty rituals which gives the false notion of women's bodies being identified with fertility and procreation

18 Madhavi D. Renavikar, *Women and Religion*, Rawat Publications, Delhi, 2003, p. 31.

are actors, contribute to heighten their inner power. Barbara Holdrege analysing the Phenomenology of Power distinguishes four dimensions of power - ontological, existential, material and socio-political.<sup>19</sup> The power of religious rituals in which women are involved invests them with a power with which they are able to often negotiate and even resist other forms of power imposed on them. The very power that is exercised as domination over them - in which traditional and institutional ritualization consolidates the existing order - is subverted by other forms.

### Women's Transgression of 'Sacred' Spaces

Yet another way in which women negotiate power is to circumvent the patriarchal boundaries. Traditionally, the space of woman was highly restricted. According to patriarchal injunctions, her movements are to be inside home, performing those stereotyped construct of gender roles. Movement outside home, in the open and public spaces were considered highly dangerous.<sup>20</sup> This is due to various reasons. The chastity of woman was crucially important for the status and good name of the family which will be exposed to danger by letting women to have access to the public space. Secondly, there is a strong prejudice, especially in the Indian tradition, that women's sexuality is insatiable, erratic and uncontrollable. This is supported by many religious myths and narratives. This view is at the origin of many customs, traditions and structures that control women and their mobility. Paradigmatic is the proverbial "lakshamana rekha" - the line drawn by Lakshamanan, the brother of Rama, which Sita was not to cross. The space within the drawn lines by patriarchy is safe, while any trespassing of the boundaries meant danger. In everyday life, all this could be seen in such practices as women being married off quite early; women not being allowed to undertake any job that

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- 19 Cf. Barbara A. Holdrege, "Towards a Phenomenology of Power", in *Journal of Ritual Studies* 4/2 (Summer 1990), pp. 5-35.
- 20 Seemanthini Niranja argues the importance of analysis of women in terms of *body-space*, and her field-study evidences this. See Seemanthini Niranja, *Gender and Space. Femininity, Sexualization and the Female Body*, Sage Publications, Delhi, 2001; see also Liana Borghi, "Space and Women's Culture", in Gabriel Griffin - Rosi Braidotti, *Thinking Differently*, Zed Books, London, 2002, pp. 83 - 96. .

exposes them in the public realm; while going out, they are accompanied by family members. There have been religious myths created to say that if women go out at night, especially to secluded places, they will be attacked by spirits or by ghosts.

Through different practices and strategies, Indian feminist movements challenge these customs and traditions through which patriarchal power is exercised. For one thing, the sheer necessity of survival, pushes women, especially women of lower castes and classes, to transgress the patriarchal boundaries. Unless they move out of the traditionally restricted spaces to the open fields, to new spaces of job, their families cannot survive, and their children will starve. This mobility women claim has become an important means for their empowerment. While responding to the needs of livelihood, the breaking of boundaries infuses them with a new power and confidence that is able to challenge the patriarchal power.

One important source for women's challenge to patriarchal religious power and its ideological legitimation, derives, as far as South India is concerned, from the Self-respect movement. The Self-respect movement of 1930s, and 1940s, initiated by E.V.R. Periyar challenged the Brahminical religious orthodoxy, and one of its important contribution was to liberate women from obscurantism and taboos wrapped up in religious ideology. It was characteristic of the women of Self-respect movement to break all the religiously sanctioned customs and transgress 'sacred' spaces. Its radical critique of caste was at the same time a challenge to the oppression of women and their subjugation in a hierarchical society. For example, among Self-respecters, marriages did away with the traditional rituals that called for the presence of Brahmin priest; They challenged the dyad of private and public spaces. They opted out of the identification of women's space as "inside" home, resulting in devaluing their labour and public visibility. Defying in many different and ingenious ways the control of patriarchy, women enlarge their spaces - physical and mental - which is highly important today for their well-being and full humanity.

Given the paradoxical nature of religion which can cause wounds as much as it can heal them, women draw from religious resources - through a feminist re-interpretation - the power as well as strategies



to challenge their confinement within patriarchally defined spaces. I may recall here from the Christian tradition two examples. In the story of Martha and Mary (cf. Lk 10:38-42), one sister is engrossed in a traditional gender role – she is busy preparing food, while the younger sister crosses the boundaries to enter into new spaces. She does what was forbidden for a woman in the Jewish society. She becomes a student in the school of the Rabbi Jesus. The realm of learning that expands the horizons of the mind and intellect – which was proscribed for women – is precisely where Maria dares to enter, and this transgression invites praise and appreciation from Jesus. “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” (Lk 10:42). The other story is that of the Samaritan woman (cf. Jn 4). She does something that was unconventional, and looked down upon by the society. She enters into intense conversation with a man at the well. Jesus’ own disciples were taken back by the audacity of the woman as much as by the sight of Jesus engaged alone in conversation with a woman – and that too with a ‘low caste’ woman, – who spoke to him her thoughts. The significance of this event is all the greater, since the Samaritan woman breaks the boundary of ethnic division (almost like caste division) erected between the two endogamous groups, the Jews considering the Samaritans as low and impure. Among Jews and Samaritans there was little exchange. By venturing to break the conventional barriers, she challenges the patriarchal power defining “caste” and gender. This breaking of boundaries leads her to new vistas of reality and to understand her own self in a new light.

### **Women Interrogate Priestly Power**

Since in most cultures, patriarchy enjoys the blessings of the priestly class or caste, it is of crucial importance for women to face the power wielded by these religious agents in the name of God. The ideological mechanism and structures of religious establishment prove often impregnable for women and feminist movements. And yet, here again women have found ways of negotiating with this form of power. The task is all the more challenging, since misogyny seems to be widespread among the priestly class, for various reasons, including historical and doctrinal ones. Clericalism does exactly in the religious sphere what patriarchy does in general to women. Clericalism, that

is the undue and illegitimate domination of the priestly class over women, is at the root of women's marginalization in the domain of religion.

To begin with, one way in which most religions subjugate women is to ascribe impurity to them, which becomes the basis for their exclusion from sacred spaces and roles. Such a view is being contested by increasing number of women, who challenge the myths undergirding such prejudices among religious agents. Studies show that increasing number of women do not consider themselves impure, unless they have internalised the patriarchal ideology.

Everyday experience shows that women are the ones who are very much attached to religious practices and devotions. Their visibility is much more evident in religious sphere than in the civic realm. They visit temples, churches, gurudwaras and mosques frequently. And yet, they are relegated to the margins when it comes to leadership or decision-making in religious establishments and performing public rituals and ceremonies. In recent times, women's voices have been growing louder clamouring against discrimination in religious leadership, participation in decision-making, etc. The exclusion of women from official prayers in mosques, has led some of them to create movements for all-women mosques where they could exercise their religious agency and leadership.

Evidently, the priestly class and its religious establishments want women to participate in religious matters. But their idea of participation is narrowly conceived and is protective of priestly power, clerical authority and privileges. This narrow understanding rests on a false premise of complementarity. Invoking the idea that men and women complement each other, in the religious sphere some secondary roles are assigned to women, and roles that involve power are firmly retained by the priestly establishment. The idea of complementarity is valid as long as the partners are viewed and treated as equals. As it is, there is an asymmetry of power. In a situation wherein there is a serious imbalance of power between men and women, acting on the principle of complementarity goes to the disadvantage of women. Complementarity means, for example, excluding women from being performers of official rituals, since, it is argued, that women have other roles.

But feminist movements continue to challenge such an exclusion. The issue became a serious one in Christian Churches, when feminists and women movements challenged the view that certain ministries were reserved only for men, and women are debarred from them. This resulted in some Christian Churches admitting women to become ordained ministers; however, not without serious conflicts. The debate has been raging in the Christian Churches and have caused also serious polarization and division wherever women were admitted to ordained ministry. In other Churches where this has not happened, feminists are fielding very persuasive arguments why they may not be excluded from exercising priestly functions. They view it as a "politics of power".<sup>21</sup> Even in Churches where these functions are admitted, as empirical studies show, women experience discrimination, as for example when they do not find postings commensurate to their capacity and qualification, which does not seem to be the case with ordained men.<sup>22</sup>

Since "brahminical patriarchy", clericalism, etc. do not permit public performance of ritual roles by women, women have found ways and strategies to invent new spaces. Let me cite two examples. The phenomenon of shamanism in which mostly women are the actors, refers to a situation in which the power of mediation between heaven and earth, the natural and the supernatural is retained by men. Shamans are also intermediaries between human beings on earth and the world of the spirits. The practice of shamanism and spirit-possession has given women a sense of freedom and agency, which otherwise they do not enjoy. The fact that they are the medium of the spirits and the deities speak through them invites awe and respect towards them. No wonder then, in many cultures, patriarchal guardians of religious authority and orthodoxy have felt threatened by shamanistic practices through which women express their religious agency.

The second case is that of mosques for women. The jamaats are attached to mosques and they sit in judgement on many issues

21 Cf. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza – Hermann Häring (eds) "The Non-Ordination of Women and the Politics of Power" *Concilium* 1999/3.

22 Cf. Dean R. Hoge, "Religious Leadership/Clergy", in Helen Rose Ebaugh (ed.), *Handbook of Religion and Social Institutions*, Springer, New York, 2000, pp. 373-387.

directly affecting them, including dowry harassment, talaq, settling of domestic disputes, domestic violence etc. The jamaats are dominated by men with no representation of women. Women could hardly hope for any fairness in the religiously dominated patriarchal mode of functioning. This experience led a group of women inspired by Daud Sharifa of Pudukottai, Tamilnadu, to form their own jamaat, and what is more, to have, perhaps, for the first time in history, a mosque for women. As Sharifa observed,

The male jamaats are unlawful kangaroo courts that play with the lives of women. A mosque-jamaat axis is power centre that controls the community. When women are refused representation here, we have no choice but to have our own jamaat. And since a jamaat is attached to a mosque, we have to build our own mosque.<sup>23</sup>

The jamaat of women functions today with forty members meeting regularly every month discussing in their meetings issues affecting women. Obviously such a daring initiative to challenge the Muslim cleric's authority and power has brought about virulent opposition and threats.

### Reappraisal of Female Body and Negotiation of Power

The issue of negotiation of power in relation to women's body is crucial for four reasons. First, body is so inextricably bound up with the self and identity of a woman and her agency. Second, the power of patriarchy is most dominating over the realm of women's body and sexuality. Third, religious traditions have contributed in varying measure to the devaluation of women's bodies through their doctrines and practices – a point which is so evident from history and present practices, that it does not require elaboration. Fourth, if as Erving Goffmann notes, body is crucial to identify the nexus between the self and social identity,<sup>24</sup> this is all the more true in the case of women.

23 Quoted in S. Anand, "Getting Ready for World's First Women's-only Mosque", in *Outlook*, 2 September 2004. There is a growing pressure on the part of self-assertive women who challenge the patriarchal power that prevents them from prayer in mosques. This was felt strongly among Afghan women whose initiative has recently led to the creation of a mosque for women in Kabul.

24 Cf. Erving Goffmann, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1969.



By the way a woman bears her body, positions it, dresses, decorates and makes it appear, and by the manner she gesticulates and expresses emotions, there takes place a non-verbal communication which is most important in public behaviour and for the mediation of her self-identity and social identity. This means that women's body is not a mere biological reality; there is an inherent element of agency in woman's body. It implies that in women's assertion, resistance and in their critical consciousness, etc., their bodies are also a part. Women negotiate with ideological power of religion and patriarchal domination in their quest of autonomy in making decisions in what concerns their bodies, and its needs, and thus give expression to their agency. There is then something like the "politics of the female body".<sup>25</sup> This is because "power relations have an immediate hold upon it [body]; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs".<sup>26</sup>

For the early feminists of twentieth century like Simone de Bueauvoir, the affirmation of the dignity and agency of woman called for a flight from the body. For, in a culture that identified woman with her biological and reproductive function, feminist response was negation of body, since it was seen as the sole site of women, and patriarchy had complete control over it. Further developments in feminist thought has led to a reappraisal of women's body and its affirmation, while at the same time refusing to identify woman with patriarchally constructed gender roles. Against this background we need to reflect on the ways women today negotiate power over their bodies sanctioned by religions.

Culture under religious inspiration, has created mechanisms to control the space and movement of the body of woman and discipline it right from childhood, especially from the time a girl attains maturity and reaches the stage of reproduction. Researching on the perception

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25 Cf. V. Geetha, "Gender and the Logic of Brahminism: Periyar and the Politics of the Female Body", in Kumkum Sangari and Uma Chakravarti (eds), *From Myths to Markets: Essays on Gender*, Manohar Publishers, Delhi, 1999, pp. 198-233. .

26 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish, The Birth of the Prison*, Vintage, New York 1979, p. 25.

about their bodies among the women of Dindigul district, Tamilnadu, Metti Amirtham observes,

It was also obvious that woman's body is subjected to a still finer discipline while sitting or waiting for a train or bus. They take as little space as possible with arms close to the bodies, hands folded together on their laps, toes pointing straight ahead or turned inward, and legs pressed together. Even while sleeping woman mostly lie towards one side and not on their back.<sup>27</sup>

Women resist the control of their bodies in different ways and claim their own agency. Whereas the Indian tradition in general, and Tamil tradition in particular, has laid emphasis on motherhood, women in the organized sector, under the influence of urbanization and economic independence and other factors, refuse to identify their selves with motherhood as the only or supreme value for women. Again, the stringent traditional dress-codes – under the pervasive influence of culture and religion – meant to control women are increasingly challenged by them. In the case of Muslim women's dress-code, religious injunctions play most important role. Defiance to conform to religiously and culturally sanctioned dress-code is symbolic of the autonomy women claim in what concerns their bodies. Most importantly women question the double-standards in sexual morality which have far too long put women in a disadvantageous and unfair position.<sup>28</sup> For 'brahminical patriarchy', the bodies of upper caste women and their chastity became the site for the inscription of tradition and religious orthodoxy, whereas lower caste women's bodies were allowed to be exploited through the "devadasi" system or so-called "temple-prostitution".

Another form in which women negotiate power relates to the emerging new attitude towards barrenness. In the past religious

27 Metti Amirtham, *Socio-Cultural Perception of Female Body. A Critical Study with Reference to the Women of Dindigul District, Tamilnadu*, (a doctoral dissertation written under my guidance at the University of Madras), Madras, 2007, pp. 84 – 85.

28 Once again we must underline the contribution of E.V.R. Periyar for challenging the duplicity of "brahminical patriarchy" in what concerns sexual morality. See V. Geetha, "Gender and the Logic of Brahminism: Periyar and the Politics of the Female Body", *art. cit.*

ideology made barren women low in front of the society and prevented them from performing auspicious functions. Today not a few transcend these traditional constrictions and valorise women for what they are, irrespective of their fertility and motherhood. Closely related to these negotiations of power, is the attitude of increasing number of women about beauty. In the past, women cultivated beauty as a response to male expectations ("the male gaze"), which is largely true even today. The beauty-myth with its colour-consciousness, internalised by women, is a subtle power exercised by patriarchy with the support of media; its consequences are disastrous for the life of a lot of women. Today, more and more women, setting aside the patriarchal parameters, would like to care for and feel good about their bodies. It gives them a sense of truly being themselves. In the lives of these women, beauty becomes part of their agency, self-assertion and legitimate pride about their bodies.

### **Conclusion : Inventing New Spaces**

The patriarchal power-structures and regimes of social regulations deeply entrenched in culture and religion present formidable challenges to women and for their project of claiming their dignity and full humanity. Especially the hold religions have over the lives of people and their consciousness are at the root of patriarchal power. However, feminist movements have found strategies and mechanisms to negotiate this kind of power.

The very scriptures which have been used for millennia to tighten the chains of oppression are loosened and women are set free through a re-interpretation of the same sources. Feminist hermeneutics of religious scriptures and doctrines, besides serving the cause of women's liberation, also enrich the religious traditions. Feminist re-reading correspond to the new insights in modern hermeneutics. What is important to note is that feminist hermeneutics of religious scriptures do not remain simply at the level of notional knowledge; this hermeneutics is deployed to transform reality by challenging the patriarchal modes of interpretation that have been dominant in all religious traditions.

Those who control the symbols, as it is said, control the society. If religion is a symbolic system invested with power, ritualization becomes the foremost expression of power. It serves to reinforce

existing power-structures. But women have, again, found ways to circumvent the ritual control. Through their agency in life-cycle rituals and by creating alternative liturgy or worship forms, women have negotiated with the patriarchal control of rituals. In the same spirit, they also transgress "sacred" spaces and enclosures zealously guarded from women by religious establishments. In doing so, women have succeeded to some extent to undermine the priestly powers. Their negotiation with power takes on different forms – subversion, challenge, undermining, etc.

Finally, the very bodies of women on the control of which hinged the patriarchal power are today endowed with a different meaning for women. In their perception, their bodies are no more to be subjected to patriarchal control; for women, their bodies are today a site of new power, the basis to claim their dignity and agency.

The task of challenging the religious powers by women has just begun. There is a long way to go. What is promising is that women today are inventing new spaces and alternative paradigms which help not only their cause but contribute to the emergence of a different world and humanity.



## Book Reviews

**Pandiappallil, Joseph**, *Jesus the Christ and Religious Pluralism: Rahnerian Christology and Belief Today*, New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001, pp. 208, price: US Dollar 24.95.

The book is part of the Doctorate work of the author at the German University of Freiburg. As the author clarifies, it is not a general study on the philosophy and theology of Karl Rahner, not even a study on his Christology as such, but a specific study on Rahner's Transcendental Christology in relation to the plurality of religions today and the question of the salvation of the people of other religions. The author has undertaken this study on Rahner as the influence of his theology on Vatican II and contemporary Catholic theology is unparallel and unique and as Rahner's approach to the other religions is more faithful to the Catholic theological tradition and theologically much more satisfactory than that of those theologians who propose a radical pluralism and a Theocentric theology.

The book is very concise in four chapters. To demonstrate and establish the significance and merit of Rahner's contribution, the author, first of all, in Chapter one selects two representatives of the contemporary radical pluralism and Theocentric theology of religions, John Hick and Stanley J. Samartha, and presented the merits and demerits of their approach to the question of religious pluralism and the theology of religions. Unlike Rahner, both Hick and Samartha experienced much more the reality of religious pluralism as they lived with it and therefore pleaded theologically for the equality of all religions. As Hick proposed a Theocentric approach to all religions as a 'Copernican Revolution' which would establish the equality of all religions, Samartha wanted a 'Revised Christology' to replace the traditional Christian absolute claims in the present context of interreligious dialogue in order to promote interreligious harmony and collaboration for the integral liberation of humanity. Christology needs radical revision in the context of 'the presence of other Lords and other Saviors in a multi-religious society'. For Hick and Samartha all religions are historical and human responses to the divine Mystery in different socio-cultural forms and as such they are necessarily plural, independent, and therefore relative and equal. Plurality belongs to

the very structure and articulation of religious experience. For both Hick and Samartha the traditional Christological dogmas are the products of historical developments in and by the Church and not part of New Testament witness. New Testament itself witnesses to a variety of "Christologies", often complementary and sometimes even contradictory. According to the author the positions of Hick and Samartha are unacceptable. They deny the 'uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ'. Their idea of 'incarnation' as myth and metaphor contradicts the Christian experience of Jesus Christ as witnessed in the New Testament and the Christian tradition.

In chapter two the author presents the 'Transcendental Christology' of Rahner in backdrop of his overall philosophy, anthropology and theology, and in chapter three his approach to other religions and his theology of other religions. Rahner's Transcendental Christology is based on his transcendental anthropology. Human being is a spirit, a mystery that is transcendence, and transcendence to Being is thus the basic composition of human being. Human person has an innate *a priori* condition of the possibility of knowing the objects or the other. It is the human person's unlimited possibility, openness to the Absolute, which is the necessary condition for God's revelation to the human person. It is the inherent human capacity to hear God's revelation or God's self-communication. It is a God-given "oboediential potency" or "Supernatural existential" in human person for knowing God and for seeing God "face to face" ultimately in the "beatific vision". Rahner's anthropology leads him to Christology. God's definitive self-communication in Jesus Christ corresponds to this orientation and structure of the human person. Human person is called to direct personal communion with God in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is God's final answer to this human God-given quest. The whole humanity in fact waited for such a climax in history in God's revelation, a perfect epiphany of God that in fact happened in Jesus Christ by the incarnation of the Word as the absolute Savior of the whole humankind. According to the author, Rahner's philosophy, anthropology, theology and Christology are all logically in perfect alignment. "To be a Christian is to be human. Jesus Christ is the perfect human being. God communicates himself in Jesus Christ completely and perfectly. Each human being has the potentiality to receive this total self-communication. No other religion is centred on such a concept"(p. 90).

According to the author, Rahner's theology of the other religions is in a way very positive, though he asserts the unique and universal

role of Jesus Christ in the salvation of the whole humankind, as Christ is the climax of the historical revelation of God meant for all. For Rahner Christianity is the religion for all human beings due to Christ's historical mediation as the absolute savior. But Christ's presence is not limited to the institutional Church, but also in non-Christian religions. The grace of God is at work in other religions too, but it is in, through and on account of Christ. The author quotes the famous "four theses" of Rahner on the theology of religions: "(1) Christianity is the absolute religion meant for all human beings. It cannot recognize the other religions as of equal right. (2) The non-Christian religions contain not only elements of the natural knowledge of God, but also the supernatural grace bestowed on human beings as a gift due to Christ; thus they can be recognized as legitimate religions. (3) Believers on non-Christian religions can or should be considered in this respect as anonymous Christians. (4) It is too much to hope that pluralism will disappear in the foreseeable future; it is permissible to interpret non-Christian religions as anonymous Christianity. The Church cannot be an exclusive community claiming salvation; rather, it is an explicit expression of a hidden reality that is present even outside the Church" (p. 95). Rahner therefore distinguishes two concepts of the Church, Church as an established visible institution with sacramental principles, and the Church as the whole humanity consecrated by the incarnation. Jesus Christ is the center of the whole humanity and history and the reference point for salvation. The experience of Jesus is available to all and in fact he saves all.

In the fourth chapter the author argues that Rahner's theology of religious pluralism presents a better approach compared to John Hick's and Stanley Samartha's approaches and defends it as the former is more faithful to the Catholic tradition and the official teachings of the Church. The author calls it as "transcendentalism" and such an approach promotes tolerance and openness towards other religions and supports dialogue.

According to the author, "Rahner accepts the believers of other religions on an equal basis" (p.149). I do not fully understand this statement of the author in the light of Rahner's first thesis that "Christianity is the absolute religion meant for all human beings. It cannot recognize the other religions as of equal right". In my opinion, Rahner's theology is a "Catholic theology of other religions" and in fact he wanted to explain and defend the official teachings of the Catholic Church in philosophical categories, and as a Catholic theologian his approach is legitimate, though it cannot be proposed as

a common theology of religions for the consumption of the people of all religions in view of promoting interreligious dialogue. But in fact, Rahner's positive reply to the question whether Hindus and Buddhists could consider Christians to be anonymous Hindus or anonymous Buddhists is very interesting and an eye opener. For Rahner, to consider the believers of other religions as anonymous believers of one's own religion is to accept others in faith, hope, and love. Such an understanding and acceptance by the followers of different religions will help us to live together, pray together, and adore the One God who is the savior of all (p. 134).

This reviewer agrees fully that a Transcendental philosophy and theology could be beneficial to theology of religions and interreligious dialogue. But when Rahner asserts that God's historical revelation in Jesus of Nazareth is the historical climax, that Jesus is God-man and that Jesus is the savior of the whole humanity, he jumps from philosophy to theology. It is his statement of Christian faith, which is acceptable only to Christian believers. According to the author, Rahner's Transcendental Christology would promote dialogue of religions (p. 131). I agree that Rahner's Transcendental philosophy and anthropology could promote dialogue of religions, but his Christology will always remain as a 'skandalon' to people of other religions. Although the author mentions the work of Jacques Dupuis, he does not enter into a discussion with him. Dupuis proposes that Theocentrism and Christocentrism are not opposed to each other, but have to be closely related. Though the author mentions the views of some Indian theologians, he has left out the view of the prominent Indian theologian, John Britto Chethimattam, who underlined the uniqueness of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and other religions while maintaining the traditional Christological faith of Christianity. Moreover, the author does not make any critical remark on Rahner. The experience of the people of other cultures and religions have to be taken into account seriously in this age of pluralism and Rahner's view can be considered only as one of them and we have to try to go beyond Rahner. In spite of these shortcomings, the author's contribution is very valuable; the clear, concise and pointed presentation is praiseworthy and the author faithfully defends the official teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, and therefore it is free from all controversies.

**Kuncheria Pathil**



**Thekkedath, Joseph S.D.B.,** *A Short History of Christianity in India*, Bangalore: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 2007, pp. 109, Price Rs. 60.

Joseph Thekkedath is widely acclaimed as one of the most eminent historians of Christianity in India. His two masterpieces are well known: *History of Christianity in India, Volume II* (1982) and *A History of the Salesians of Don Bosco in India from the Beginning up to 1951-52*, in Two Volumes (2005). He has recently authored a short Guidebook in Indian Church History, which he wrote especially in view of students in various theological colleges in India. The book is, as he himself acknowledges, the printed form of his class-notes, which he had prepared in the 1970s while taking classes at Kristujyoti College Bangalore and Sacred Heart Seminary Poonamallee. It is in fact an excellent introduction to the history of Christianity in India.

The book contains six short chapters, a selected bibliography of two pages and five maps. Chapter One introduces the question of the origin of Christianity in India. It examines the evidences in favour of the Indian apostate of St Thomas with the conclusion that it is probable that Apostle Thomas came to South India, considering the evidences and the probability becomes a practical certainty if one takes account of the Malabar tradition and the evidence about the tomb of Mylapore. Chapter Two outlines the history of St Thomas Christians and their Chaldean connection until thirteenth century as far as it can be deduced from the sources of foreign documents, Indian tradition and the Inscriptions and monuments. Chapter Three gathers some information on Indian Christianity before the Portuguese period from some of the travelogues of John of Monte Corvino, Jordan Catalani and others.

Chapter Four is the longest chapter of the book, which covers the Portuguese period from sixteenth to eighteenth century. As Portugal was interested in spreading the Christian faith in all their colonies, Roman Catholic authorities in Rome gave them some special privilege called '*Padroado*' (Patronage) by which they could appoint bishops in their conquered territories. This chapter explains the *padroado* and how the Portuguese exercised it in India with its center in Goa. Christianity spread rapidly during this period in Goa,

Bassein(Vasai), Kerala and Tamil Nadu coast, Madurai and many interior parts of both South and North India. Gradually Rome and Propaganda Congregation also established Apostolic Vicariates directly under it in many places. This led to long-standing conflict between *Padroado* and *Propaganda*. Chapter five briefly presents these jurisdictional conflicts of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and its solution with the establishment of autonomous Indian Hierarchy in 1886. This chapter also presents the growth of Christianity in India during this period among the *Adivasis* and *Tribals* in the various parts of the country that have become today the great centers of Christianity.

Chapter Six introduces the presence and growth of the other Christian Churches, both Eastern and Protestant, in the different parts of India. The faction of St Thomas Christians that separated itself from the Roman authorities in 1653 is today divided into many different Churches, Jacobite, Syrian Orthodox, Mar Thoma etc. The first Protestant missionaries to India were sent by the Lutheran King of Denmark and they settled in Tranquebar (in Tamil Nadu) in 1706 and started their mission work. Gradually more missionaries from different Protestant and Anglican Churches came and it became a mass movement in Tamil Nadu, Andhra, Bihar, Bengal and North East. Today some of these Churches have entered into a union forming the 'Church of South India' and the 'Church of North India'.

The book has a precision and clarity and it is rather objective without entering into any controversy either historical or theological, and the author therefore deserves congratulations. But some parts of the book are just skeleton and I wish that the book had a little more flesh. The students need to know much more details and perhaps the list of selected books recommended is expected to do the rest. Mathias M. Mundadan has published a similar book, *Indian Christians* (1984, with a recent second edition). The CBCI Text Book Committee is currently involved in publishing a series of textbooks or Guidebooks for Indian Catholic seminaries and theological faculties. I wish that these two stalwarts in the area of history of Indian Christianity, Joseph Thekkedath and Mathias Mundadan combine their contributions and views and prepare a better textbook in the CBCI Text Book Series for the benefit of all students.

**Kuncheria Pathil**



The following "References", left out in printing, belong to Julian Saldanha's article entitled "The Story of an Axiom" in *Jeevadhara*, September 2007

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